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### Organisational responses to the employability agenda in English universities

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**Organisational Responses to the Employability Agenda in English  
Universities.**

**By Robert B Gilworth**

**Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Business Administration**

**University of Bath  
School of Management  
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Robert B Gilworth

## **Table of Contents**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction (p. 7 - 38)**

- 1.1: Project Rationale and contribution (p.7)
- 1.2: Literature Review and Framework (p.12)
  - 1.2.1: Positional / Status Competition (p.12)
  - 1.2.2: The Knowledge Economy? (p.15)
  - 1.2.3: Employability measures in the public domain (p.20)
  - 1.2.4: Institutional measures of employability success (p.29)
  - 1.2.5: University/student partnership-co-production v. Consumerism (p.31)
  - 1.2.6: The impact of recession (p.34)
  - 1.2.7: Existing Literature on Approaches to Employability within Universities (p.35)
  - 1.2.8: Understanding organisational responses to the employability agenda (p.37)

### **Chapter 2: Methodology (p.39 - 57)**

### **Chapter 3: The Case Studies (p.58 -106)**

#### **3.1: Case Study 1 (p. 58 - 69)**

- 3.1.1: Background (p.58)
- 3.1.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy: What is to be achieved? (p. 58)
- 3.1.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in in positional competition with other institutions? (p. 59)
- 3.1.4: Delivery: How will the strategic aims be realised? (p. 60)
- 3.1.5: Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the Careers Service (HoCS): (p. 62)

#### **3.2: Case Study 2: (p. 69 -79)**

- 3.2.1 Background (p. 69)
- 3.2.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy: What is to be achieved in relation to employability? (p.70)
- 3.2.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in employability in positional competition with other universities? (p.72)

3.2.4: How will the strategic aims be realised? Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the careers service ( HoCS) (p. 73)

**3.3: Case Study 3:** (p. 79 - 89)

3.3.1: Background (p. 79)

3.3.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy: What is to be achieved? (p. 79)

3.3.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in employability compared to other institutions? (p. 80)

3.3.4: Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the careers service (p. 83)

**3.4: Case Study 4:** (p. 89 - 96)

3.4.1: Background (p. 89)

3.4.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy: What is to be achieved? (p. 89)

3.4.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in positional competition with other universities? (p. 90)

3.4.4: How will the strategic aims be realised? Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the Head of the careers service (HoCS) (p. 92)

**3.5: Case Study 5:** (p.97 -106)

3.5.1: Background (p. 97)

3.5.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy: What is to be achieved? (p. 97)

3.5.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in positional competition with other universities? (p. 99 -100)

3.5.4: The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the careers service (HoCS) (p. 100)

## **Chapter 4: Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion (p. 107 - 138)**

- 4.1: Starting points (p. 107)
- 4.2: Institutional Identity (p. 109)
- 4.3: Core similarities across the Employability-Added Universities (p. 114)
- 4.4: Professional service/corporate centre/academic SBU structures (p. 115)
- 4.5: Increasing engagement with the professional service (p. 118)
- 4.6: The maturity of the extended central professional service (p.120)
- 4.7: Issue awareness and executive-level drive (p. 121)
- 4.8: Strategic capability (p. 123)
- 4.9: Students as an “employability input” – educating and informing incoming students (co-production) (p. 129)
- 4.10: Status positioning (p.136)

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and next steps (p. 139 -149 )**

- 5.1: Issue Awareness (p. 140)
- 5.2: Employability Identity (p. 142)
- 5.3: Co-Production with Students (p.144)
- 5.4: Professional Service/Corporate Centre/Academic SBU alignment and Strategic Capability (p. 145)
- 5.5: Questions for the Higher Education Careers Profession (p. 146)
- 5.6: Issues for Employers (p. 147)
- 5.7: Policy issues (p. 148)
- 5.8: The New Fees Era (p. 148)

## **References (p. 150 -156)**

## **Bibliography: (p.157-160)**

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## **Abstract**

### **Organisational Responses to the Employability Agenda in English Universities**

Employability is highly topical in UK Higher Education. There is related literature debating the purpose of higher education, learning and skills, contextual social and economic issues and policy matters for the sector as a whole, but no published work on the ways in which universities organise themselves to deal with this particular issue. This study examines the organisational responses of universities to the issue of graduate employability at this pivotal time for English higher education, when the environment is linking employability to institutional success to an unprecedented degree. The study considers key contextual factors including the debate around the relationship between “the knowledge economy” and the demand for graduates, the ways in which success in employability is understood and measured, the impact of recession and the tension between student consumerism and partnership in an environment in which “consumer information” is linked directly by government to notions of return on personal investment and value for money as tuition fees increase. The key questions addressed are: how is the employability offer conceptualised, constructed, managed and measured and what choices about organisational configuration and capability are being made and acted upon?

The study required detailed analysis of the relationships between institutional mission and top-level goals, declared strategy for delivery and delivery structures and the roles of key individuals and teams and so, this enquiry is based upon in-depth case studies of five universities, using data on graduate destinations, published statements and strategies and interviews with relevant post holders (with a particular focus on the role of the head of the professional career service).

The case studies and analysis relate the organisational responses to the underlying driver of positional competition. The study uses the role and position of careers services as the starting point for attempting to understand the organisational responses in each case.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1: Project Rationale and Contribution**

The impetus for this project came from the increasing importance attached to “employability” as a management issue for English universities in the context of positional competition between institutions. In particular, the timing of the study was prompted by highly significant and linked events in the higher education policy environment. One of these was, the government decision that amongst numerous public sector funding cuts, there would be a cut of c80% in funding for undergraduate teaching in higher education, with severely reduced state funding for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (the so-called STEM subjects) and the complete withdrawal of state funding for the teaching of arts, humanities and social sciences. Another major set of events was the publication of the “Browne Review” report “Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education” (Browne 2010) and the subsequent (and widely anticipated) government decision to lift of the cap on tuition fees in England to a maximum of £9000 per annum from 2012, moving English higher education into an era in which the individual undergraduate student will be expected to make a far higher contribution to the cost of their higher education than ever before, albeit through post-qualification repayments rather than “up front” fees.

Coupled with these events has been an active and sustained, government drive towards consumerism amongst the primary “customers” of English universities, namely potential and current undergraduate students and their families, with employability featuring strongly amongst the set of consumer expectations, based on the idea that good career prospects should be part of the “deal” between the student “consumer” and the university “provider.”

A consistent theme running through the Browne report and subsequent government policy, including the White Paper “Students at the Heart of the System” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2011) is that of the provision of “more and better” information, which the “consumers” (prospective students) can use to make informed choices of institution and course. Employability is one of the key items to feature in this increased information provision. The requirement for the publication of “employability statements” had already been implemented by the coalition government.



*“I can announce today that I have asked HEFCE to write to higher education institutions and further education colleges that teach HE degrees, inviting them to publish employability statements. These statements, written directly for a student audience and readily accessible online, will summarise what universities and colleges offer students to help them become job-ready in the widest sense and support their transition into the world of work.”* (David Willets, Minister of State for Universities and Science in a speech at Oxford Brookes University on 10 June 2010).

The announcement of the publication of the White Paper suggested strongly that the proposed reforms would have an impact in the area of employability both through the provision of pre-application information and direct impact on the ways in which universities prepare students for the job market. All of this was in line with previously announced requirements for higher education institutions to publish a “key information set” (KIS) which will focus on performance on a number of key indicators deemed to be of critical interest to potential students and this includes information on graduate employment destinations and salaries. Other items relate to the cost of living and accommodation, entry requirements, and national Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS) scores.

The language of “putting students at the heart of the system” is unequivocally about the power of the informed consumer in a much more marketised system. Examples used in the launch of the White Paper include: “doing more than ever to put students in the driving seat” and “we want the sector to be more accountable to students” The clear implication is that informed consumers will not choose courses and/or institutions which do not (appear to) deliver on certain key benefits of higher education in return for a substantial personal investment. Given that the consumer will be a significant funder and in the case of arts, humanities and social sciences, the sole funder of undergraduate higher education, it is suggested that consumer-driven market forces will ensure the responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency of the sector, with the attendant implication that the market will penalise those institutions departments or courses which cannot show that they meet consumer requirements, one of which is employability.

A clear and direct line of policy intent relating to consumer information can be drawn from the introduction of employability statements through government response to the Browne review and the White Paper to the introduction of the KIS. In this

context, the introduction of the KIS is seen by government and by universities as a step change in the provision of consumer information as institutions will be compelled to display standard-format information in the form of a “widget” embedded into the web page for every undergraduate programme. The widgets and the data included in them will be centrally generated by government agencies, not by the institutions themselves. The data used will be the same as that used in a revamped version of “unistats” a web-based resource which prospective students can (and will be encouraged to) use for comparing programmes.

There are issues of concern about the practical details and these are explored later, but it seems that the advent of the KIS is intended to have a significant impact on both the consumer related discourse around the value of higher education as personal investment and on the management responses within higher education institutions to the provision of consumer information. At the macro level it could be argued that the use of consumer information in this way facilitates rapid manipulation by government, of the public discourse around entry to higher education away from the major cuts in higher education funding underlying the correspondingly significant shift of the cost burden to the student; over to the consumer issues of value for money and return on investment. In this context, government is telling prospective students and their families that the universities are asking them for high levels of private investment and that government agencies will empower them as consumers to ensure that they get the best value for money and return on investment from these purveyors of high cost private goods, through the provision of highly visible, standardised information for comparisons. KIS information is to be made freely available and in this context it is no great surprise that “best buy”-style consumer information organisations including “Which?” have already declared an interest in using the information.

Current and (especially) prospective undergraduates are being encouraged to take a consumerist view of employability both as return on investment (ROI) for the future and as value for money in the here and now. In ROI terms, consumers are encouraged to look at destination and salary data in the KIS as an indicator of the labour market value placed on specific degrees and institutions. In value for money terms, they are encouraged to consider the quantity and quality of employability support which will form part of the student experience in exchange for (higher) tuition fees. Essentially, the drive towards a consumer culture is encouraging

students to evaluate and compare the extent to which universities visibly convey anticipated private status/positional benefits to a greater degree than ever before.

Higher education institutions are now operating in an environment in which the dominant discourse suggests that where employability is not delivered to a sufficient degree, the course/institution in question is failing to deliver the requisite quality of experience and expected benefits to the student customers. The clear implication is that these courses, departments or institutions will face legitimate market penalties as informed consumers (prospective students) will ultimately choose to study elsewhere, with obvious implications for the financial health or even survival of the units or institutions in question. This is summed up in the government response to the “Wilson Review” of university-business collaboration (Wilson 2012) as follows:

*“Better informed students are more likely to choose a university and a course that provides them with the right learning experiences, and best prepares them for work in their desired career. Universities will need to respond to the demands of informed students and improve their practices in order to compete for students, and businesses will profit from being able to recruit energised and innovative graduates.”*  
(Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2012 p.29)

The implication that employability is a key feature of competition between institutions could hardly be clearer. In these circumstances, employability is very likely to be a live issue for university leaders and managers, at the most senior strategic level as well as those directly concerned with the delivery of employability “on the ground.”

Clearly, the tripling of tuition fees and the heavy public policy emphasis on consumer information are new and significant factors to be taken into account by managers in higher education not least, those concerned with careers and employability, as employment outcomes feature strongly amongst the private returns to be evaluated in the decision to invest in higher education. However, this study starts from the premise that positional/status competition between institutions, with employability as a feature, pre-dates these events which serve to exacerbate and sharpen that competition, rather than to initiate it. Significant though they are the funding cuts and tuition fee increases were widely anticipated in the English higher education sector. The advent of the KIS is a continuation of a trend towards consumer information. The introduction of published employability statements was taken forward by the coalition government in 2010, but was actually proposed by the

previous Labour administration. University league tables have been published in UK newspapers and on line for many years and employability scores have always featured in them. Nonetheless, the run up to what has been perceived by many as the “big bang” of 2012 in relation to the strategic importance of employability is the principal reason why it was important to conduct this study at this particular time.

The topic of employability features strongly in public (media) and policy discourse and as strategic issue within universities. There is a substantial body of literature relating to professional, pedagogic and/or careers guidance approaches to employability in higher education, but there has not yet been any detailed analysis of universities’ organisational responses to the importance of employability as a strategic management issue in the context of positional competition. Therefore, the purpose of this piece of work is to look inside higher education institutions to try to understand employability as a management challenge for those institutions in strategic and organisational development terms. This study works on the basis that whilst the current level of market attention to employability is unprecedented, this component of positional competition between institutions is not new and some universities have been taking a pro-active approach to this as a management issue for some time. This study looks at some of those institutions to see how they address this issue from corporate aspiration through delivery strategy to the actual interface with students and employers. In the context of pre-existing but rapidly sharpening positional competition in which employability is an important feature; how are employability offers conceptualised, constructed, managed and measured and what choices about organisational configuration and capability are being made and acted upon? There is a particular focus on university careers services based on a hypothesis that their roles and positions within higher education institutions provides a particularly useful “window” into the organisational response to employability.

It is hoped that the insights derived from this study will be of interest not only to those directly involved in managing institutional approaches to employability, but also those concerned with the impact of the employability agenda from academic and policy perspectives. The work may also be of practical value to other stakeholders such as graduate recruiters who may be interested to learn about some new organisational approaches to dealing with employability in institutions with which they may have or wish to develop a relationship. The study should also be of interest to the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory services (AGCAS),

as the professional body most clearly identified with the higher education employability agenda in the UK and Ireland.

## **1.2: Literature Review and Framework**

Before going on to introduce the institutional case studies and related discussion, which form the heart of this study, this introductory chapter will provide some more background to the environment in which it is clear that “employability matters” This section will outline the critical importance of positional/status competition between institutions as the principal theoretical and analytical framework for this study. This section also includes consideration of the ways in which some of the fundamental assumptions about supply and demand and the role of universities in the graduate market are contested, whilst acknowledging that the notion that employability matters is an inescapable element of the operating environment for higher education leaders and managers. The background will also include a critical examination of the ways in which success in employability terms is measured and interpreted in the public domain, the role of student engagement and some consideration of the impact of the recent recession on perceptions of the graduate job market and the employability offer made by universities in that context. Finally, this chapter refers to the predominance of pedagogic and professional practice approaches in the existing literature relating to action in the area of employability in higher education and therefore to the need for an attempt to add to knowledge of approaches to employability in management and organisational terms, which might usefully employ some concepts from the mainstream management literature.

### **1.2.1: Positional/Status Competition**

Perhaps the most significant and pervasive set of ideas surrounding and influencing all the actors concerned with employability in higher education is that of status or positional competition and this study looks at organisational responses to increased emphasis on employability in that light. The author shares Marginson’s (2004) assumption that higher education institutions play a central role in the production and allocation of social status (social advantage, social position). Universities both convey and acquire the social good of status and the accompanying economic, political and cultural advantages, notably career success. Marginson argues that competition between higher education institutions has always been based on status, rather than say, revenues for their own sake as might be the case in genuine

economic competition. In this sense, status competition persists within and certainly pre-dates the increased marketisation of higher education in many societies and systems in recent years. He goes on to argue that the impact of status competition is heightened in societies in which neo-liberal assumptions underpin the public policy which governs the operating environment of higher education. Prior to the ascendancy of neo-liberal assumptions, there was competition for status, which was largely state supported and regulated. No cash transactions needed to take place between consumers (students) and providers (universities) for the status competition to operate.

This study took place at a particular moment in the development of English higher education when the understanding of higher education as a commodity benefit was being vigorously promoted by government within a broadly neo-liberal agenda. Marginson suggests that pre-existing status competition operated to a large extent on that same understanding and therefore lent itself to the “neo-liberal project” of the introduction and extension of economic market ideas into higher education. At the same time, the marketisation of higher education tends to increase the emphasis on social status “which operates as both the commodity objective of individual students and the means of ranking producer institutions in the market” (Marginson 2004 p.179)

Marginson’s analysis could certainly apply to the topic of this study. Access to graduate careers which would otherwise be unobtainable is arguably the most obvious status benefit of higher education for the student consumer. Producing graduates who obtain high level jobs also conveys status to the institution. Success is co-produced between student and institution, creating a circular, win/win situation. This is particularly true at the upper end of the market where there are particularly high status rewards for both student and institution through access to “top jobs” with the “top employers” typically the Times Top 100. Indeed, the win/win circle of status benefit includes the employers themselves at the top end of the market, again in a spirit of co-production as being the employer of choice for “top graduates from top universities” and being the sort of employer which only targets a particularly prestigious group of universities, conveys mutually reinforcing positional branding benefits to all three parties. At this particular time in English higher education, the introduction of higher fees, coupled with the government drive for consumerism and consumer information mean that it is more than ever the case that this particular aspect of social status is a “means of ranking producer institutions in the market.”

Marginson usefully contrasts human capital theory with status competition. He argues that the choice behaviour of students choosing institutions and employers recruiting graduates is heavily based on status goods (institutional prestige) as signifiers and that this behaviour is more in line with status competition than the rational evaluation of difficult to compute human capital. Marginson suggests that students want the status goods with the highest possible (labour market) value and that they identify these by making educated guesses based on an understanding of status derived from what he calls "common sense " or "common gossip." (Marginson 2004 p185). There are many who would argue that this understanding of institutional status is "common gossip" in some socio-economic circles and not others, meaning that some guesses are more educated than others. The proponents of a greater volume of more visible and more standardised consumer information might argue that not only does this help to take out the guesswork to some degree it does so in a way which creates more equality of information upon which to base informed choices.

Marginson's article was published in 2004 and whilst it could not have foretold precisely the situation that would come about in England in 2012, it clearly describes the direction of travel towards the situation with which the institutions and managers featured in this study must now grapple. Status competition which existed already is being sharpened by the introduction of a higher level of student fee, which the students and their families are being strongly encouraged by government to see as transactional. Even those institutions which would traditionally be favoured by the traditionally status-based educated guesses are now exposed to scrutiny in relation to graduate employability, which is based not on what the public might assume (the educated guesses) about the longer term positional value of attending that institution, but on "hard data" relating to very short term returns. In this respect, it is very important to understand that employability (employment outcome) information in the KIS and the various league tables is based on data from the destinations of leavers from higher education (DLHE) survey taken at a point six months after graduation. Institutions which may not benefit from traditional status related assumptions, but which lay claim to a vocational identity which might be assumed to generate direct entry into related graduate level employment (an "educated guess" with a different basis, perhaps) will be subject to similar scrutiny. Pre-existing positional competition continues in an atmosphere in which the public are being encouraged more strongly than ever before to test claims and assumptions about the positional/status benefits of attending institution x as compared to institution y.

Despite the contested rhetoric of the knowledge economy driving demand for higher level skills, (more on this later) the basic arithmetic difference between supply of fast track graduate jobs with the major graduate recruiters and the potential demand from the far greater volume of students entering higher education, suggests that this aspect of social status competition is likely to be subject to the “remorseless logic of zero-sum” (Marginson 2004 p.186) for students and institutions alike. The prizes of top jobs with top organisation are in limited supply and so, by definition, the winners win because the losers lose. The institutions and managers featured in this study face the challenge of trying to ensure that their universities and students are amongst the winners as economic marketisation and a government drive for consumerism add new dimensions to pre-existing status competition. Given the status basis of positional competition between institutions, the terms status competition and positional competition are regarded as interchangeable for the purposes of this study.

### **1.2.1: The Knowledge Economy?**

Government policy in relation to higher education and employability seems to be underpinned by two fundamental assumptions. One, as outlined earlier, is the idea that good career prospects should be part of the “deal” between the student “consumer” and the university “provider.” The other is that the UK’s competitive position in the global “knowledge economy” depends in part, on the continued production of a large numbers of graduates and that this is a key justification for the existence of a mass higher education system, which must therefore be funded somehow. It should be noted that the direction of travel being pursued by the current, coalition government was set in train by the previous Labour administration, with the publication of “Higher Ambitions-the Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy” (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2009)<sup>1</sup>. This document described the interrelationship between the purpose of universities and the economic well-being of the UK in the following terms:

*“This process of knowledge generation and stewardship is a public trust and important in its own right. However it is vital that universities use it to contribute to economic growth, both through the commercial application of the knowledge they generate and through preparing our people for the world of modern work.”* (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2009<sup>1</sup> p14).



Clearly it is the second half of this statement as it relates to the employable graduates, as distinct from discussion of research and knowledge transfer, which is at issue in relation to this study.

There appears to be national policy level consensus from one UK government to the next that the “knowledge economy” will drive demand for large scale output of graduates. In relation to personal returns on higher education, the suggestion is that this demand will maintain a graduate salary premium, whilst a responsibility to prepare large numbers of employable graduates is placed upon the higher education sector and its constituent institutions. The logic underpinning reports such as “Future Fit” (2009) from Universities UK (UUK) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) seems to be that national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy requires large numbers of employable graduates produced by a mass participation higher education system. However, this is not to suggest that the labour market ideas underpinning this are uncontested. Brown, Green and Lauder (2001), Brown (2003), Brown and Hesketh (2004) and Lauder, Egerton and Brown (2005) have robustly critiqued some of the assumptions around the extent to which the “knowledge economy” drives the demand for employable graduates and the associated economic returns to graduates.

Brown and Hesketh (2004) call into question the lack of attention to what they call the duality of employability.

*“Policy debates have concentrated on whether those in the job market have the appropriate skills, knowledge, commitment or business acumen to do the job in question.” “This neglects the fact that some job applicants are employable but are not offered posts because of a mismatch between supply and demand-there are simply not enough vacancies.”*

These quotations are taken from the book “The Mismanagement of Talent” which was published in 2004. At that time, the graduate job market was booming but even then, the focus of the “mismatch” referred to was the difference between the scale of the supply of traditional “fast-track” graduate schemes and the much larger number of graduates produced by a massively expanded higher education system. In 2010 and 2011, Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) member surveys tended to record fast track graduate vacancies in the low twenty thousands, compared to a national first degree graduating force which was roughly ten times that number, though it is important to recognise that significant sub sets of that graduating force,

such as medical, dentistry and healthcare graduates do not compete in the "AGR market." Nonetheless, the recession of 2008/9 had previously put these supply and demand issues into sharper relief, as the supply of opportunities with the larger graduate recruiters in membership of the AGR fell by approximately 25% in 2009 (AGR 2009).

Although arguably over simplified and possibly over stated in order to be newsworthy, the supply and demand issues highlighted by Brown and Hesketh emerge with some regularity in the media. For example "*Graduate gloom as 83 apply for each vacancy*" was the front-page headline for a lead story in the Independent on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2011. This refers to the average number of applicants per graduate vacancy in the 2011 recruiting season, received by the members of the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR) responding to that organisation's summer survey (AGR 2011). In fact, both the AGR and other commentators (Birchall 2011) were pointing out that the graduate job market was recovering quite well from its recession-induced low point in 2009 and that the increase in applications per job was not due to a further reduction in jobs available, but to more "career-savvy" students making more applications per head. Nonetheless, the media coverage of the AGR survey does help to point out to the public, the level of competition in the market for what are traditionally perceived to be the most attractive graduate opportunities. Whatever the balance of responsibility for preparing graduates for employment, the public discourse around graduate employability carries strong implications that preparation for graduate level employment is something which should be going on whilst students are at university, so that they are ready to engage effectively with a knowledge based job market, demanding high level skills when they complete their studies. Some media coverage as in this case draws public attention to supply and demand issues in ways which are less evident in government rhetoric about the knowledge economy and more reflective of the critical stance taken by Brown and Hesketh et al.

A common thread running through the critiques offered by the commentators referred to above is the notion that the graduate salary premium is maintained at least in part, by real wages for the less well qualified being driven down in an environment of "credential inflation." It is also argued that the gap between a tiny elite at the very top of the graduate market and the rest is widening, thereby weakening the argument that the higher level employment returns from a university education are available to the mass of graduates from a mass higher education

system and undermining the legitimacy of using fast-track graduate schemes for the few as illustrative of the likely returns for the many. In this regard it is interesting to note the comparison between the commentaries on salaries in the AGR winter survey (AGR 2012) covering the AGR membership as a whole and "The Graduate Market in 2012" (High Fliers 2012) which covers the Times Top 100 employers, which is in effect, an elite within the elite of the AGR. The AGR survey commented on a rise in average starting salaries to c £24000, whilst starting salaries amongst the Times Top 100 were reported to be "static" but at c £29000, well above the average for the AGR as a whole.

The notion of the graduate market providing high- flying opportunities for a tiny elite is also used by critics of the perceived manipulation of the purpose of higher education in feeding the labour market. Hayes and Wynyard (2002) for example refer to "the McDonaldisation of Higher Education" suggesting that the true purpose of higher education is being perverted in order to fit with the prevailing norms of the market.

A reasonable counter to Brown and Hesketh in terms of the availability of opportunities might be to suggest that the graduate opportunity structure has many more graduate level opportunities beyond the traditional schemes offered by AGR members. This is quite true. There has been significant growth in (at least the visibility of) regional graduate-specific recruitment by small and medium sized enterprise (SMEs) typified by developments such as Graduates Yorkshire and Grads East. These opportunities do not feature in the AGR figures and neither do the opportunities for a number of public sector professions (particularly in healthcare) for which standard entry education and training operates at first degree level through the higher education system.

There are longitudinal studies which go well beyond the six month DLHE census date. These include those by Purcell and Pitcher (1996), Purcell and Elias (2004) and Purcell, Elias, Davies and Wilton (2005). These studies tend to show very high levels of graduate level employment and satisfaction with the higher education experience and subsequent career development and could be seen to support claims about the lifetime benefits of higher education. In showing the longer term absorption of the vast majority of graduates into graduate level work, these commentators offer a contrasting picture to the supply and demand critique offered by Brown and Hesketh et al. These surveys also counter the narrow perceptions of

what constitutes a valid graduate job by reinforcing the notion of a broader range of *graduate appropriate* occupations including but extending well beyond, the traditional AGR fast track schemes. However, these studies are based on a limited sample and not an effective sector-wide census like the DLHE. They have no real utility in institutional comparison and were not intended for that purpose. Whilst they may offer some support to arguments for an expanded higher education system, these studies do not fit the consumer information mould of instant comparison of short term returns

Whilst the existence of a broader range of potential graduate opportunities can be used by government and HE institutions to counter the argument about the small number of “AGR” vacancies relative to size of the graduating population, this does not seem to prevent government and others using the relatively high salaries for the elite graduate schemes as the basis for illustrating the “graduate premium” in terms of life time earnings. These debates are important, as the operation of supply and demand in the graduate market must be an important consideration for anyone involved in graduate employability as a management challenge for and stakeholder expectation of, higher education institutions.

Although there is much credible critique of some of the underlying assumptions, it remains the case that the dominant discourse in the public policy arena in which higher education managers must operate seems to assume that the knowledge economy will drive demand for high level skills, which necessitates a mass higher education sector and maintains high level returns to graduates. It further assumes that the sector and its constituent institutions should overtly set out to meet this demand and be judged by all the key stakeholders on their ability to do so. A third key assumption is that current and potential students are paying consumers and must be provided with consumer information upon which to base informed choices. Information on employability is a key element for the judgement of institutional success or otherwise. These assumptions prompt the obvious question...”what does success look like?” and the next section attempts to explain the ways in which employability success is measured as a critical contextual factor in relation to institutional approaches to employability.

### **1.2.3: Employability measures in the public domain:**

It is clearly important for university leaders and managers concerned with employability to understand the ways in which success is or could be measured. It may well be the case that institutions will need to devise their own internal measures to evaluate the success or otherwise of their employability interventions and/or to measure progress against internal objectives which are not necessarily concerned with public comparison with other institutions. In all cases, however, the managers in question will need to have a critical understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the public domain measures of employability as these are the bases upon which their institution will be compared with others in the context of positional competition.

A term such as “employability” sounds like it should be about capability in terms of being in a position to compete effectively for available graduate level opportunities, by virtue of having and being able to demonstrate the requisite qualities. As Brown and Hesketh suggest, the extent to which this translates into graduate level appointments, will be influenced by the state of the market at the time. As it happens, the most commonly used measures of success in this area are actually based on employment outcomes, rather than graduate capability, although it might be argued that whether or not graduates obtain graduate level jobs is the “acid test” of their employability.

The standard measure of graduate employment in nationally published league tables is that of the percentage of graduates entering “graduate level” destinations (jobs or further study deemed by a national coding system to be at graduate level) at a point six months after graduation, as measured by the national Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. The data are collected by the institutions themselves and returned to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), which in turn, provides the data to the compilers of league tables and from 2012 onwards, will feed the data directly into the Key Information Sets for every first degree programme at every university. The figures used in the public domain tend to be those for UK domiciled first degree graduates only. The data made generally available on the HESA web site tends to be aggregated at “system” levels (regions/nations, levels of study and so on) in an attempt to show how the UK HE system is faring in terms of graduate destinations. As with any other survey, the DLHE and the league table statistics derived from it are based on the known

respondents and the DLHE survey has a very high response rate- typically around 80%.

Clearly, the purpose of league tables is comparison of institutions. The implication here is that readers of the league tables will be able to see the extent to which institutions generate graduate level destinations for their graduates. In most cases, the “employability figure” (often referred to as “graduate prospects”) is based on grouping graduate level destinations, both in employment and further study together as “positive” and unemployment and relative “under” (not graduate level) employment together as “negative” expressing the graduate prospects score in terms of positive destinations as a percentage of the known total. The higher the proportion of those who are unemployed or in work in what are deemed to be non-graduate occupations at the census date, the worse the institution will fare on this particular measure. The implication is that the relative value placed on the graduate “products” of universities by the gatekeepers of graduate opportunities, will be reflected in the varying proportions of graduate level destinations.

Most league tables extend the notion of graduate labour market worth, based on quality of outcome, from institution to the level of individual subject area. This is also true of the central admissions system UCAS, through its facility called “unistats.” This would appear to make sense as prospective students’ UCAS applications are for individual degree programmes, not whole institutions. Interestingly, unistats is linked through both “student” and “parent” tabs on the UCAS website, but is more overtly signposted to parents (often the principal “investors” at this stage) with the following description: *“The unistats website allows your son or daughter to compare universities and colleges and find out what other students think”*.

Unistats offers just three pieces of information on each subject by institution. These are the typical entry qualifications (on the UCAS tariff system), the graduate employment outcomes (% into graduate-level jobs) and the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS) score. So far, the graduate employment outcomes reported in unistats have not been the same as the graduate prospects “scores in newspaper league tables, as they do not include further study. Instead, the headline figure is the percentage of those going directly into employment (not further study) entering graduate level jobs. This reduces the size of the data set and “not enough information” is a frequently occurring result when searching the site for graduate employment information. In fairness, the further study information is available, but

requires more active searching. It is also the case that the system applies a standardised set of subject descriptors onto which the specific offerings of individual institutions may or may not be successfully mapped. This very brief analysis of unistats might be enough to call into question its declared utility as consumer information to aid informed choice, but it is widely known and promoted as an integral part of the national application system.

In 2012 the unistats approach will be extended to feed the mandatory key information set (KIS.) which is to be made available for all university undergraduate courses. In the KIS, items on the cost of living and accommodation will be added to the entry requirements, NSS and DLHE-based scores already included in unistats. The "graduate jobs" figure will continue to be published on the same basis as before and will therefore, be different from the graduate prospects scores used in league tables in many cases. It should be noted that the graduate prospects scores themselves are not entirely without shortcomings as detailed consumer information intended to facilitate like for like comparison. The positive destinations (graduate level employment and further study) are not disaggregated nor are the negative destinations of unemployment and underemployment. So, for example, Physics at universities A and B could have identical graduate prospects (% of positive destinations) scores but what is not apparent from this is that one is actually overwhelmingly made up of graduate level jobs, whereas the other is overwhelmingly made up of postgraduate study destinations. This is not to offer a value judgement as to which of these is "better" but the distinction could be important to a prospective student. Equally History at universities C and D could also have identical scores but the negative aspect of one is that a fairly high proportion of graduates are in non-graduate jobs, but there is little or no unemployment, whereas the other has a high unemployment rate but those who are in work are predominantly at graduate level. Of course, these differences can be discerned if the universities in question provide a more detailed breakdown of their destinations and many do this already, before the introduction of the KIS.

An important aspect of employment related data to be included in the KIS, which has not hitherto been common in league tables is that of average salaries earned by graduates of the course in question, based on DLHE data gathered at six months after graduation. Arguably, this move is entirely consistent with a government drive towards consumer information in the context of return on private investment. A market, rather than governmental precedent has been established for many years in

relation to taught post graduate programmes offered by business schools, especially the Master of Business Administration (MBA). The business school reference is relevant here as the notion of return on a significant private investment in terms of a salary premium is a key feature of the MBA market. On a simplistic level, the taught postgraduate business school market is a potentially useful example for the proponents of consumer information including employment and salary information. It is certainly the case that the business school market has given rise to many detailed consumer guides, based on the central notion of return on private investment. However, this market is in fact, very different from the undergraduate degree course choice for which the KIS has been devised. Full-time MBA students typically have several years of junior to middle management work experience and/or may be technical specialists, looking to move into broader more strategic (and better paid) roles. In most cases, the calculation involves not only the cost of tuition and living costs, but also the opportunity costs and risks of giving up a job to take the course. Loans to fund the costs of the course are likely to be at commercial rates of interest, without the deferred payment terms attached to undergraduate student finance in England. The full time MBA market is substantially international.

Whether in newspaper league tables, unistats or now, the KIS, the focus on quality of outcome at six months often comes under criticism precisely because it is a snapshot at such an early point, with the weaknesses that this implies for telling the whole story about the early career trajectories of new graduates. This is particularly true in relation to contrasting employability as developing capability, with an outcome snapshot at six months. For example: graduate A had given no thought at all to his career during his undergraduate studies, but could afford to do a Masters course and easily secured a place on a relatively non-selective programme, with no particular plan as to where this might lead. Graduate B on the other hand, had given a great deal of thought to her future career early in her final year and had come to a sound but relatively late decision to follow a particular professional career path. In order to execute her plan, graduate B embarked on some essential non-graduate level work experience immediately after graduation. The graduate prospects score based on the DLHE would show graduate A to be in a positive destination, with graduate B counted as negative, whereas an application of the notion of employability as capability might produce the opposite result. HESA argues that a key strength of the DLHE survey is its high response rate and that this would be likely to diminish significantly if the survey were to be taken much longer after graduation. Local attempts by the author and others to conduct DLHE follow up



surveys at dates further beyond graduation tend to add credence to the HESA argument. On this basis, there is a strong argument that the comparative data in the league tables and the KIS are derived from the only available source (DLHE) which enables like with like comparison on the basis of a high response rate.

The logic of the move to the KIS is clear enough in that prospective students will tend to focus on applying to study a particular subject and therefore like for like information on similar programmes at several institutions may be of more practical value than institutional level information. There are some practical difficulties however, in that the statistical threshold of valid responses for any given programme will mean that information for relatively small courses will tend to be aggregated up to varying levels of cognate subject groupings. This may mean fewer examples of “not enough information” for prospective students making comparisons through unistats but may in some cases make for comparisons which are not really like for like. If subject A is a large programme at university x but a small one at university y, the comparison may actually be between the specific subject at x and a broader grouping of related subjects at y.

It would seem to make sense to factor in the state of the graduate market at the time when evaluating destinations data. Ignoring the demand side of the equation (the state of the graduate market) creates serious problems in terms of comparing “employability” from one year to the next. The proportion of graduate level destinations (certainly graduate level jobs) for the graduates of institution x may well be lower in a recession than a boom, but does that reflect the employability (capability) of the different cohorts? Was the class of 2009 significantly less employable than the class of 2007? On the other hand, it could be said that inter-institution comparison within a given year remains valid as all institutions will face the same overall market conditions.

The other important issue which is not taken into account in relation to percentage into graduate level employment is that of student/graduate choice. There is evidence (Gilworth 2009) to suggest that a significant number of graduates will choose to remain in their university city for a year or so beyond graduation in order to prolong their student lifestyle for a while (beyond the DLHE census date), supported financially by a non-graduate job. This phenomenon of relative underemployment as a lifestyle choice can have a direct impact on the graduate prospects score. Does the fact that these people have chosen not to compete in the graduate level market

within the DLHE time frame reflect negatively on their capability or the worth of a degree from their university? Would all of the students taking part in the counter-cyclical drift towards a Masters degree, fuelled by recession in 2008 and 2009 as an alternative to competing immediately in a difficult job market, have been sufficiently “employable” to have secured graduate level jobs had the job market been more buoyant? In a metro-centric graduate job market in which over half of all fast track graduate opportunities are in London and the South East, might a university in a city which offers a particularly appealing lifestyle for new graduates in their early twenties, regardless of the “graduateness” of their employment be reasonably compared with others in locations with lower levels of lifestyle appeal and higher proportions of immediate migration to London? Might this be an issue to be borne in mind by universities which use the “pull” of their location to attract students? It is also the case that there are numerous new graduates (Gilworth, Conway and Howie 2011) registering negative, non-graduate-level destinations at the DLHE census point who are exercising constructive career choice and executing a plan to make themselves employable and that plan necessarily involves a period of essential non-graduate level work experience (classroom assistant work as an aid to an application for teacher training, for example) and/or the need to earn some money to finance the next stage of the plan, particularly if that involves post-graduate study. As illustrated earlier, it might be that some graduates with limited financial means but with clear and realistic plans for graduate level careers can be unfavourably compared at six months beyond graduation with some relatively well-off students drifting aimlessly into Masters programmes.

Whilst some (perhaps those for whom the figures tell a particularly good story) institutions and/or schools or programmes within institutions make use of the percentage into graduate employment (graduate prospects) figures, this has not hitherto been the most common statistical expression of employability as used by institutions themselves in communication to the public, including prospective students. Instead, institutions more commonly use figures which relate to their employment performance indicator (EPI). The basic formula is derived from the known respondents to the DLHE survey (again, UK domiciled first-degree) and is calculated as follows: employed plus further study over employed plus further study plus presumed unemployed. Those deemed “not available” (this group includes those taking time out for whatever reason—often travel, but also illness or caring responsibilities) are disregarded for this purpose. The resulting figure expresses as

a percentage, the proportion of graduates active in the market that has gone on to work or further study at the DLHE census point.

For example an institution with a graduating force of 1000 might have 800 DLHE respondents. If 5 % of the 800 (40 graduates) were deemed unavailable and the remaining 760 were divided into 555 employed, 137 further study and 68 unemployed, the calculation would be  $692/760 \% = 91\%$ . An institution in this position may well say on its website (or in some cases in TV advertisements or on the side of buses) “over 90% of our graduates are in employment or further study within six months of graduation.”

HESA sets a benchmark for each institution, which takes into account factors such as mission, subject mix and intake. In this way, the performance indicator provides the statistical answer to the question “has this institution done as well (on graduate employment) as expected?” Clearly, the institution in our example would have performed well if its benchmark was 90% or lower. Conversely, it would have underperformed if its benchmark was 92% or higher. HESA produces a data set every year which shows how each institution performs against its benchmark. Although comparison is easy, this information does not seem to be deemed particularly newsworthy and rarely makes much impression in the public domain. Institutional performance against a similar benchmark for widening participation (based on the relative proportions of state and independent school leavers in the student body) tends to create much more media interest. The EPI figure will feature in the KIS, however.

The performance indicator ignores the quality of the destination, but it is very clearly affected by unemployment as a negative factor. Arguably, this measure could be seen as a measure of success in terms of the extent to which the graduates of the institution avoid unemployment. In the light of the 2008-2010 recession and significant media focus on graduate unemployment; the avoidance of unemployment may be seen as quite a worthwhile and important measure. On its web pages for 2010 entrants, The University of Surrey said:

*“The University of Surrey has the best employment record of any UK university. That's a bold statement to make, but with the latest statistics showing we have the lowest unemployment figure in the country, and the best average unemployment rate of any university over more than a decade, the evidence is clear.”* (University of Surrey 2010).

There is no suggestion of selective “spin” here in choosing to focus on the unemployment aspect, as most “insiders” including the author of this piece, would say that the University of Surrey has a very strong track record in graduate-level employment as well.

One advantage of the performance indicator as a measure is that it deals with the underemployment compared to unemployment issue referred to earlier in relation to the league table graduate prospects figure. If two universities had identical or very similar graduate prospects scores, but behind the aggregation of outcomes, it was the case that one had a significantly higher unemployment rate than the other, then the one with the higher unemployment rate would have the lower performance indicator.

Whatever the strengths of the DLHE in terms of comprehensiveness, comparability and response rate; it is the case that the different emphases of the two main DLHE-based measures can produce very different interpretations of the same data. A very clear illustration of this is the fact that the DLHE data for the class of 2007 can be used to show that the same institution which tops the Russell Group in terms of performance against employability benchmark, (by exceeding its benchmark to a greater degree than all the other Russell group institutions) comes next to bottom of the Russell Group in terms of percentage into graduate level destinations. The principal reasons behind this contrasting set of outcomes are that the institution in question has a very low level of unemployment, but a significant proportion of graduates opting for non graduate employment in the city in which the university is based, as a life style choice. The same institution is very highly ranked by graduate employers (see THES world league tables and High Fliers below). Is this university a “good” one for employability or not?

The other major public domain measures related to employability are employer rankings. There are two of these which tend to be referred to in the UK. They are the employer ranking in the QS world league table and the High Fliers table of the top twenty most employer-targeted universities in the UK. The QS table was quite frequently cited when it was the THES World League Table, but the THES table is now compiled by Thomson-Reuters and no longer contains an employer ranking. The QS table continues to be published but tends not to attract as much media attention in the UK as it once did. The QS ranking is an opinion-based ranking by major employers, who are asked to rank institutions in terms of the quality of

graduates as recruits. In 2009, which was the last year in which the ranking appeared in the THES table (THES 2009) the upper reaches of the overall table tended to be dominated by American and British universities. Russell Group Universities did very well in terms of the employer ranking with several scoring 99 or 100 (out of the 100 maximum) and occupying places in the world top thirty. This particular measure is open to criticism on the grounds that it is an opinion poll, rather than a measure of actual outcomes. It is also criticized for reinforcing the established order in the sense that the employers may well vote for institutions with which they are already familiar. This is exacerbated by the fact that the compilers of the table invite institutions to submit nominations of employers to be contacted. On the other hand, it could be argued that this measure benefits from a degree of independence from the state of the market. Employers can rate the perceived quality of graduates from various institutions regardless of the numbers of vacancies available in the year in question. Perceptions of quality could also be based on known quality of graduate recruits over a period of time. There is an argument to suggest that this measure could be seen as more of a measure of employability as perceived capability, as distinct from being a measure of employment outcomes.

The annual graduate market report by High Fliers research contains a table of the twenty universities most frequently targeted for on-campus recruitment activity by the Times Top 100 graduate employers. This table is much more frequently cited than the QS table and has garnered a good deal of press exposure in recent years. Indeed, in 2011 the Times printed the top half of the table inside its university league table supplement. The High Fliers top twenty table shows which institutions are most targeted by the major recruiters in terms of putting finite staff and cash resources into an on-campus presence. This could be seen as a relatively robust indicator of employability as perceived capability in that it reflects hard-headed business decisions to target finite resources at the most frequent providers of high-calibre graduate recruits. On the other hand, its utility as a whole sector like for like comparison is limited as the table will only ever feature twenty universities, so the public would not have a score for a university outside that group. Clearly, this particular measure could not be used in the KIS. Of course, what the public does see from the High Fliers top twenty is who is in and who is not. With the single exception of Strathclyde, the High Fliers Top Twenty for 2011 (High Fliers 2011) was made up entirely of Russell Group and '94 Group universities, though not the whole membership of either. Although it will not appear in the KIS, the High Fliers top twenty carries powerful messages on behalf of the universities which are in it,

indeed the level of exclusivity which renders this measure unsuitable for the KIS is central to its appeal as differentiator in a crowded market. For certain institutions including those currently in the top twenty, those who have recently dropped out and those with realistic aspirations to feature in the table, the High Fliers top twenty could be a very useful benchmarking tool. Certainly, this measure could be seen to have significant appeal to the co-beneficiaries/co-producers at the top end of the positional/status competition in higher education.

Public domain employer rankings then, have utility for a minority of universities and can allow some comparison within a relatively small group. This exclusivity in itself is an important signifier of the win/win relationships at the upper end of status/positional competition but it is clear that the only whole sector employability measures, which can feasibly be included in the KIS and be promulgated through whole sector league tables and UCAS are those based on the DLHE survey data. Despite the undoubted diligence of the compilers of league tables and other guides and the drive for standardisation of the KIS, it is not necessary to delve too far below the surface to start to show some important shortcomings in the DLHE-based ratings as bases for informed consumer choice. The same could be said about these data as bases for institutional strategy and management action, but on the other hand, they could be said to represent socially constructed market reality in terms of positional competition, with which managers must interact. The absence of other large scale, comparable datasets has to be acknowledged, meaning that DLHE data must inevitably feature in any strategy which is ultimately about public comparison with other universities, which is itself inevitable in the context of positional/status competition.

#### **1.2.4: Institutional measures of employability success:**

The strengths and weaknesses of public domain measures do not preclude devising other measures of employability success which have significant meaning within the institution. In those institutions which identify employability as an issue relating to overt strategic goals which therefore require organisational action, then measures which determine what success will look like in terms of the impact and efficacy of those actions will be essential. By definition such measures are not in the public domain in the same way as the KIS data, although some institutions will wish to declare the initiatives to which they relate in their published employability statements. The relationship to the employability statement is important, because

this is one example of a public declaration of a university's employability "offer" to students. The use of DLHE-based data in public comparisons is inescapable, but it is worth noting that the cycle of collection and publication has meant that the data that prospective undergraduate students have seen in the league tables has so far, reflected a situation which obtained two years before they began their studies and at least five years before they were due to graduate. Given the pace of change, there will undoubtedly be students graduating in any given year who will move into jobs which did not exist five years previously. The intention for the KIS is that the time lag will be reduced to one year and four years, but the sense of DLHE data necessarily reflecting the past rather than the future remains.

Whilst the destinations of graduates from one or two years earlier may be of interest to incoming students and their families, it seems reasonable to assume that many will have a stronger interest in what the university will offer them personally in terms of helping them to develop their employability during the three or more years of their undergraduate programme. It is worth noting that this takes place against a background in which there is regular media criticism of universities in general, calling into question their interest in preparing students for employment. An example would be the following newspaper headline:

*"Universities need to teach basic job skills, say employers" followed by: "Universities should be required to teach employment skills as part of degree courses because employers believe too many graduates are unfit for the workplace, researchers said today."* (Daily Telegraph 4<sup>th</sup> June 2011).

The article goes on to include a more sober statement from the actual research report:

*"The majority of employers are satisfied with their graduate recruits but there is a notable minority who are not."* (Lowden, Hall, Elliott and Lewin 2011 pp10/11).

Despite the more balanced tone of the research report on which the article is based, the headline is one example of a recurring theme in the media suggesting that universities pay insufficient attention to the work-readiness of their graduates.

Even without the media coverage, it seems critical that whilst university managers concerned with employability will have regard to the outcome-based, public domain measures of success and institutional comparisons; they must also pay attention to

the development, articulation and success of the university's employability offer. They will need to make use of data to inform the construction of the offer and they will need to devise measure of success in order to evaluate and develop the offer. If as Marginson suggests and government policy seems designed to encourage, students and their families will seek higher education status goods with the highest labour market value, then the "active ingredients" of the development of employability as part of the university experience will need to be more overtly articulated and promoted as consumerism sharpens positional competition in the new higher fees era. These may be input rather than outcome measures or indicators but they can be powerful signifiers of status benefits, particularly for institutions able to point to high quality, high value facilities, highly regarded careers services and the involvement of/support from, high status professions and "top" employers.

Whatever the scale and quality of the employability offers made by universities, a key success factor will be the spirit in which students engage with them.

#### **1.2.5: University/student partnership-co-production v. consumerism:**

The compilers of league tables do not suggest that employability is the only, or even the primary factor in the array of information that they present for consumer consideration. There are all kinds of other features sought by potential students, many of which could outweigh specific information about employability. The higher education "offer" is multi-faceted and the relationship between student and university is not (at least not yet) purely transactional. The government drive for consumer information however, does pick out employability as one of a small number of key factors and it could be argued that this approach is driving the university/student relationship towards the more transactional, although universities and as explained below, some high-profile student representatives see the relationship in partnership terms.

Of the 118 higher education institutions listed in the 2011 Guardian League Tables (The Guardian 2010), fifty registered a graduate-level destinations score of less than 60% (with the lowest score being just 40%). If higher education were a consumer product and a formally recognised graduate-level career outcome at six months after graduation was *the* key benefit expected from the consumer in a purely transactional fashion, simply in exchange for tuition fees (more or less regardless of the student's



own input), the business of higher education could be in serious trouble, given the apparent failure of nearly half of the sector to deliver the key benefit to over one third of its consumers.

For student consumers to desert the sector on the basis of its failure to “provide employability” the relationship around employability would need to be purely transactional and there would need to be a greater quantity and range of viable alternatives for (more or less) well-qualified school and college leavers. An important issue to take into account here is the relationship between supply and demand for undergraduate places in the English higher education system

*“There will be intense pressure on places this summer. That pressure derives from the underlying growth in demand, from a spike in the birth rate back in 1992, and because more people are applying to university given the shortage of job opportunities. Applications are up 16 per cent on this time last year, and there simply isn't the capacity to meet such a surge in demand.” (Willets 2010).*

By 2012, the demographic situation had changed with a decline in the number of eighteen year-olds following the “spike” and set to continue for some years. This, combined with higher fees altered the supply and demand situation to some extent, but the key phrase in the quote from David Willets is the one about more people applying to university given the shortage of job opportunities. Perhaps one reason why there is limited consumer flight from the higher education option as a path to career success for school leavers with level three qualifications is the lack of viable alternatives.

Student representatives (albeit those already in the system who are not personally liable for the higher tuition fees) acknowledged that they are not simply passive consumers of a product in exchange for a tuition fee in all areas of student life and the development of employability is no exception. The National Student Forum, which has been very influential in shaping government and funding council policy on many aspects of the student experience, offers the following vision statement in the employability section of its 2009 annual report.

*“As a student I am motivated and proactive in improving my employability, but my university also supports me so that I feel able to make an informed decision about the next step, confident that I have valuable skills and experience to offer potential*

*employers and optimistic about my career prospects*" (Department for Business Innovation & Skills 2009 p.8)<sup>2</sup>

Speaking at the University of Leeds Learning and Teaching Conference in January 2011, Aaron Porter, then president of the National Union of Students stressed the importance of "co-production" where universities and students share in the construction of a high quality student experience, over transactional "consumerism."

The notion of co-production is an important one in terms of defining what employability success looks like at the institutional level because the development of employability is arguably an extreme example of co-production. The best employability offering that a university can make, especially if it is predominantly co-curricular and therefore optional, will make no difference to individual students who choose not to engage with it. The level of perceived student engagement within an institution might influence the balance between inputs and outcomes and/or curricular (compulsory/unavoidable) and co-curricular (optional) provision when it comes to the internal definitions of success in employability. Indeed, the level of student engagement may be an internal measure of success in itself. These ideas of co-production as shared effort can be added to Marginson's discussion of co-production of shared status benefits to illustrate a situation in which universities need motivated students to actively "join in" with the co-production of graduate employment outcomes, especially if the students are to achieve the outcomes which count most heavily in positional/status terms within the six months from graduation time frame of the DLHE-based measures of success.

It will be increasingly important for leaders and managers to understand that they could be trying to deliver employability in the spirit of partnership within which student motivation will be key, in a public policy and media environment which strongly encourages "fee and return" consumerism. However, as Marginson suggested, this factor is mitigated for highly selective institutions because selection is two-way. Very able and motivated students choose and are chosen by institutions at the higher end of the status competition rankings. Under the "remorseless logic of zero sum" the most able and motivated students are not evenly distributed across the higher education sector, instead, they cluster in the institutions at the top of the rankings. In terms of employability success, the asset of highly capable and motivated students will not accrue to the same degree to universities who are recruiters as it does to those who are selectors. Willetts' statement about lack of

alternatives might also serve to alert some institutions to the idea that even at a higher fee level, they may be working with some students whose presence is largely a factor of the lack of a viable alternatives. Willetts' statement about lack of job opportunities links the notion of consumer information about the employability benefits of higher education to the impact of recession.

#### **1.2.6: The impact of recession:**

Recession is a critical factor influencing debate around graduate employability. Prior to 2008, much of the discourse around graduate employability had taken place against a backdrop of a relatively buoyant UK economy and within that, a buoyant graduate job market. By stark contrast, the summer of 2009 saw the first generation of students from English universities to have paid "top up" tuition fees graduating into the most difficult graduate job market for over twenty years. The last comparable recession, in the early 1980s is at the limit of the professional memory of many of the managers currently engaged in leading institutional efforts around employability. Even for those who remember that recession well, the circumstances were very different in that the UK at that time had an elite rather than mass higher education system with a far smaller output of graduates. The relatively small numbers emerging from the system in the early 1980s had not been called upon to pay tuition fees.

The graduate job market in recession was a new and unexpected phenomenon for the graduates in the "class of 2009." The impact of recession on the job prospects of graduates emerging with unprecedented levels of debt attracted massive media coverage. The most widely quoted graduate market report (High Fliers 2009) gave a clear insight into the decline in vacancies amongst leading recruiters and low levels of confidence amongst final year students even on the most employer-targeted campuses. This research was heavily used by the media. The High Fliers report also indicated areas of steady or expanding graduate recruitment, but this did not negate the overall message of downturn.

The depressed levels of student confidence reported by High Fliers and others might suggest that the reality of recession and importantly, the high profile media coverage of its impact on the graduate job market could begin to challenge the widely accepted assumptions about a knowledge economy hungry for the skills of an expanded pool of graduates. Certainly, some elements of the media and those

with media access who seek to challenge the expansion of participation in higher education on the grounds of over-supply of graduates have been quick to use the impact of recession on graduate vacancies to advance their case. In a radio interview in June 2010, against the backdrop of a recruitment fair with levels of employers and vacancies back to those of 2007, the author was asked for an opinion on the notion of a 50% participation rate, given the shortage of graduate jobs, even though the physical backdrop to the interview was illustrating an upturn in graduate opportunities. This was just one of a string of media interactions during 2009 and 2010, with this underlying agenda.

The impact of recession is still current and important but unsurprisingly, does not really feature in government announcements intended to allay fears about increased tuition fees. For university managers, dealing with prospective students and their families at the “sharp end” it would be naïve to assume that the impact of recession has completely dissipated. This predominantly middle-class audience will include people who will have read the Independent article mentioned earlier and several others like it and who may themselves have been victims of recession-fuelled “down-sizing.” Some members of this articulate and well-informed audience may see it as particularly ironic that the financial crisis which led to the recessionary impact on the graduate job market is also at the root of the need to shift the burden of funding higher education so significantly towards students and their families on the basis that personal investment in higher education will produce strong personal returns in the job market. Whatever the irony of the situation, heightened awareness of the competitiveness of the job market for the highly qualified may well make this audience more rather than less likely to seek to be convinced of the employment benefits of a degree course.

#### **1.2.7: Existing Literature on Approaches to Employability within Universities.**

The body of literature in this field is substantial, but tends to focus on the practice of educators and careers guidance practitioners, rather than on strategic management issues. For example a systematic literature review of research into career-related interventions for higher education (Bimrose, Barnes and Brown 2005) featured fifty nine empirical studies, divided into six themes, all of which were practice based. Harvey. Knight and Yorke in various combinations have been prominent in the area of employability in the curriculum over the last sixteen years or so (Harvey and Knight 1996, Harvey, Moon and Geal with Bower 1997, Harvey, Geal and Moon

1998, Knight and Yorke 2002, 2003, 2004, Yorke 2010). A thread running through much of this work has been to move debate away from a “training” view of employability as the development of threshold level competencies for obtaining a first job, towards a focus on the ways in which graduates, as a result of their higher level education can offer transformative capacity to organisations (Harvey and Knight 1996) and to emphasise some of the similarities between higher level skills (meta cognition for example) desired by employers and those traditionally developed through learning and teaching within the context of higher education subject disciplines (Yorke 2010, Barnett 1994).

Similar threads run through the most recent Higher Education Academy (HEA) guide to Pedagogy for Employability (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac and Lawton 2012) in particular the authors’ suggestions about the desirability of learning and teaching of employability to be afforded a level of academic credibility which it may be seen to lack. This work considers employability in its economic and policy context, but mainly deals in depth with pedagogical issues, often with illustrative case studies. The case studies in the HEA guide are offered as examples of what can be done at the level of learning and teaching practice. However, there was one relatively recently published study, which to some degree, looked at organisational configuration in relation to employability and which provides a useful element of the analytical framework for this study. Although the nature of the enquiry is different, there is a link between this work and the conclusions of the report “Break-Out or break-Up?” (Watts and Butcher 2008), which contrasted the fortunes of the careers services in two pre-’92 universities in which the role, remit and resources of the services were developed, creating what Watts and Butcher called “extended careers services” with the ways in which careers services were effectively broken up and subsumed into other structures in two post-’92 universities. The extended services have drawn in resources and responsibilities for related activities, such as enterprise, volunteering and work placements. The process of extension has continued in some institutions since the Watts and Butcher report and indeed, the pre-’92 universities included in this study are all examples of the continued development of extended careers services in which the remit of the services has broadened beyond the traditional core of Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and the provision of opportunities for students to meet employers. However, they are at different points on the extended/non-extended continuum. The extended/ non extended service idea was very useful in the choice of institutions for the case studies as well as being a useful concept in describing the situations in each one.

There are numerous sector-level reports about approaches to employability, of which “Future Fit” (UUK/CBI 2009) is a relatively recent example which was widely promoted within the sector. The essential premise of Future Fit was that the UK higher education as a whole could and should do better at preparing students for employment, in support of the competitive position of “UK plc” in the global knowledge economy. The report offers a range of practical examples of good practice, as is often the case in reports of this nature. Although some of these are slightly more oriented towards the management and configuration of resources than some of the purer practice/pedagogy items mentioned earlier, the focus is still on specific, limited scale initiatives, rather than whole institution strategic approaches. Crucially for the purposes of this study, reports of this nature operate at the level of exhorting all institutions to “do better” based on an “all for one” national interest view of feeding the knowledge economy. They do not acknowledge positional competition in which employability developments might be pursued in a spirit which is far from “all for one” and which is seen as a key driver of organisational approaches in this study.

With the exception of the useful notion of extended/non-extended careers services provided by Watts and Butcher, the higher education employability literature tends to focus on the defining the nature of employability or its incorporation into the curriculum or broader student experience at the level of specific activities or the individual practice of teachers or careers guidance practitioners. There is no literature looking at employability as a strategic challenge for institutional managers, taking a whole institution approach to strategic intent and the configuration of resources to deliver against that intent in the context of positional competition between institutions. This study attempts to add to knowledge by focussing on these particular considerations at a time when significant events in the history of English higher education, seem to make them especially important.

#### **1.2.8: Understanding organisational responses to the employability agenda:**

This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the environment in which university leaders and managers must operate in relation to the topic of graduate employability and provides the context for an enquiry into the ways in which universities are responding as organisations at this pivotal time in the history of English higher education, when the environment is linking success in the area of employability to institutional success and/or survival to an unprecedented degree.

In order to generate the required level of understanding of organisational responses, it was important to undertake some detailed analysis of the relationships between institutional mission and top-level goals (the “why” element of the organisation’s approach), declared strategy for delivery (the “what” element) and delivery structures and the roles of key individuals and teams (the “who” element) and so, this enquiry is based upon in-depth case studies of five universities (as distinct from say, a shallower survey approach to a large number). Using published data on graduate destinations, published statements and strategies and interviews with relevant post holders (with a particular focus on the role of the head or director of the professional career service), a set of case studies describing the varying institutional approaches has been developed.

The case studies and subsequent cross-case analysis included the application of ideas from the “mainstream” strategic management literature. These include the notion of levels of strategy (corporate, competitive and operational), the alignment of environment, values and resources and the essential processes of analysis, choice and implementation as described by Johnson, Whittington and Scholes (2011) and Thompson and Martin (2005) amongst others. Also included are considerations of the linked concepts of strategic capability (Johnson, Scholes and Whittington 2006) core competencies (Hamel and Prahalad 1990) and dynamic capability (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen 1997).

The key questions being addressed were, how is the employability offer conceptualised, constructed, managed and measured and what choices about organisational configuration and capability are being made and acted upon? The context was one in which status/positional competition was being sharpened and accelerated (though not originally created) by rising fees and a push for more detailed consumer information. The hypothesis was that organisational responses would have their roots in positional competition and that the positioning of careers services would provide a useful starting point for attempting to understand these developments.

## **Chapter 2: Methodology.**

This piece of work attempts to add to knowledge about the impact of and institutional approaches to, the heightened importance of employability in the context of positional competition between institutions. The intention was too look inside a number of higher education institutions to try to understand employability as a management challenge for those institutions in strategic and organisational development terms and to answer the question "How is the employability offer conceptualised, constructed, managed and measured and what choices about organisational configuration and capability are being made and acted upon?"

As the research question suggests, declared institutional strategy is of direct interest to the researcher and so, some analysis of published strategies would seem appropriate. If the purpose were to ascertain and report on what published institutional strategies across the sector have to say on the topic of employability, it may have made sense to conduct a large-scale review of published strategies, via a comprehensive trawl of university websites. For a lone researcher undertaking this work, this would be a very substantial undertaking, although the scale of the task could be mitigated through the application of a limiting factor such as geographical region or institutional mission group. A review of the publically declared strategies relating to employability of universities in say, the South West of England or across the '94 group may have been an interesting and useful piece of work. The fundamental problem is that this approach may have answered one part of the research question for a greater number of institutions but would not have answered the whole of the research question for any of them.

The research question was not just about declared strategy. It was about the relationships between the external environment, strategy and action. It was about the organisational response to the issue of employability, involving the configuration of resources and the roles and responsibilities of individuals and teams. The enquiry required multi-layered evidence from a variety of sources and therefore, lent itself to a focus on depth rather than breadth. This is one of the reasons why a survey, whilst considered, was not a suitable method for this work. It would have been extremely difficult to construct unambiguous survey questions to get at the sort of information required for this study. This was not a hypothetico-deductive enquiry in which for example, the instances of known and/or readily communicated categories of whole-organisation responses to employability could be tested out through a large scale



survey, although the Watts and Butcher idea of extended and non-extended careers services proved to be a very useful device for focussing the enquiry. Instead, this was an essentially inductive enquiry, or perhaps more accurately an abductive enquiry in the sense that Hammersley (2005) describes abduction as “the development of an explanatory or theoretical idea, this often resulting from close examination of particular cases.” This study required the development of a relatively deep understanding of the “story” of employability within a realistically manageable number of institutions from which interesting themes and patterns of organisational response could be derived. Arguably, the emerging themes could subsequently be used in a larger scale survey approach, provided that they could be sufficiently succinctly codified and explained to participants. The option of explaining the themes face to face to a large audience of potential survey participants in the context of an Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) conference is a very realistic one for the author and is indeed a very likely route to the dissemination and impact of this work. This opportunity could be used as an explanatory pre-cursor to a survey and/or to engage the audience face to face in something more akin to a focus group or collaborative enquiry. However potentially valuable in taking the research forward, these activities are clearly subsequent to, rather than part of, the study described in this thesis.

The need for depth, the establishment of narrative and an essentially abductive enquiry appeared to lend itself to a case study approach. The nature of the study was to attempt to describe, compare and contrast the approaches being adopted and to understand how and why they are playing out as they are.

*“Case study research generally answers one or more questions which begin with “how” or “why.” (Soy 1997).*

An essential assumption for this study was that there would be a variety of organisational approaches and the need to understand a variety of approaches required a multi-case study using examples which appear likely to represent a variety of organisational approaches.

An immediate problem generated by the choice of the case study method involving in-depth case studies of universities was how many to select and on what basis. Attempting to conduct case studies of all the members of any given “mission group” (Russell group, '94 Group etc) would have been impractical because all of those groups have more member institutions than a single researcher could feasibly cover

in the depth required for this exercise. Choosing from within a mission group would necessarily introduce some other selection criteria which might render the mission group redundant as the basis for selection. A likely criticism of choosing all the cases from within a mission group, based on general perceptions of institutional hierarchy, rather than the specifics of the research question might be an assumption that there would be a lack of variety, reducing the possibilities for comparing and contrasting across cases, because the institutions would be too similar. Whilst it is the case that the sampling method used in relation to the specific research question, resulted in the inclusion of more than one institution from a particular mission group, the sampling method itself and the detail of the cases indicate that there are actually significant differences between the organisational responses to employability amongst member institutions of that group. Regional groups could be seen as more varied and representative of the sector as a whole. Again, the vast majority of groups are too large. For example, there are ten institutions in Yorkshire and Humber and eighteen in the South East. One "region"-Northern Ireland has too few institutions (two). It could be argued that cases which were all within the same regional economy could be as limiting in terms of comparing and contrasting as choosing from the same mission group. From the author's perspective it could be argued that this would not be an especially limiting factor as the graduate employment market is partly regional and partly national and global and that the relative importance of each of these market sectors could well vary across institutions in the same region. However, from the perspective of potential audiences for reports on this research, a single region may well be a face-value limitation on the perceived value of the report for audiences outside the region in question.

One of the principal reasons for not using a sample based on a pre-determined grouping of institutions such as a mission group or region was the more compelling requirement for purposive identification of the key participants in the study in terms of their organisational positioning. The research question requires evidence which links top level institutional goals to delivery strategy, Key Performance Indicators and organisational structure in order to provide a narrative of the organisational response to employability. Whilst documentary evidence was important in all cases, the other key component was in-depth conversation with key individuals in positions which enabled them to provide that linking narrative, which together with the documentary evidence provided the story of the organisational response to employability in each case.

The most logical target group in which to find managers occupying the territory which links institutional strategy and delivery in the area of employability were the heads/directors of university careers services (HoCS). Given the heightened profile of employability, it is quite likely that HoCS may not have been the only managers in their respective institutions for whom the issue of employability was a feature of their role. However, they formed the target group for the interview component of this study because they were very likely to be the only managers for whom employability was the primary (if not sole) driver for their role within the institution. They were also likely to be the only managers with responsibility for delivering employability services to students and employers across the board regardless of academic discipline or occupational sector. This group was also likely to contain managers with responsibility for providing support and advice to other managers within academic departments and at the centre of the institution.

An immediate attraction of this target group of post-holders was that the overwhelming majority of UK higher education institutions have one. The association of graduate careers advisory services (AGCAS) has 131 member services (AGCAS 2012) in the UK and Ireland, each with a designated HoCS. However, it should be noted that the management role of HoCS is not uniform across the higher education sector in the UK. Some are senior staff, employed on professorial grades, with direct reporting lines into members of the senior executive management of their Universities, seats on key committees and genuine standing and influence within their institutions. At the other end of the scale, there are those whose designation by AGCAS as "Head of Service" is due to the fact that they are the sole careers guidance practitioner employed by their institution. Their status inside the institution may be quite junior and they may not be regarded as managers at all, much less heads of department. There are of course, numerous levels of seniority and influence along the continuum and whilst there is some degree of connection to resource levels, with Russell Group services tending to be larger, there is no hard and fast connection between the position of the HoCS and readily applicable labels such as mission group. What was clear is that there are HoCS within AGCAS who may not be close enough to strategy-making in their institutions to be in a position to provide the linking narrative required for the purposes of this study

Whilst the face-value link to the topic of employability, meant that heads of careers services offered an obvious route to identifying managers to take part in this project, it is important to be clear that a specific sub set of this broader group needed to be

identified in order to provide meaningful insights relating to the research question. The sub group identified for the purposes of this project were identified by the author, through the professional network of which the author is also a member, as both the leaders of their university's central service(s) dedicated to employability **and** the principal professional advisers on employability and related issues to the University's senior management and broader community. In order to follow the strategy to delivery path of analysis, it was important to identify managers who were placed at the interface between the two. They needed to be sufficiently senior/well-connected/influential to be able to offer informed comment on strategy formulation, whilst being neither too far removed from day to day delivery (as might be the case for the executive-level "owners" of the strategy) or too far removed from strategy (as might be the case for heads of careers services who did not fit the criteria for this project). In this sense, the selection of institutions for the case studies was strongly influenced by the identification of key participants seen by the author as being well positioned to contribute.

Given the importance of positional competition to the conduct of this enquiry, there may have been a logical imperative to use this as a factor in identifying the case studies. As Marginson suggests, the institutional pecking order of prestige is broadly understood, at least amongst those potential students, (and their families and schools) for whom progress to university based on received perception of the good bad and indifferent is an accepted rite of passage. The pecking order is nonetheless socially constructed and subject to some variation away from the extremes. It is largely subjective and away from the extremes may or may not be entirely congruent with the "objective" rankings in league tables or the exact make up of mission groups, particularly the Russell Group. For example, the author's direct experience of dealing with sixth form students and their tutors and parents at open days suggests that the term "Russell Group" in everyday use by people who are not higher education "insiders" has become synonymous with "top universities" without necessarily being completely accurately equated with the formal membership of that group. It is this spirit of relative subjectivity, aligned with Marginson's notion of "educated guesses" which makes positional competition and perceived hierarchy a critical factor in the analysis (rather than the selection) of the case studies, because these factors, based on internal and external perceptions of where the institutions sit or think they should sit in the pecking order and the impact of employability performance on relative status clearly influence strategic organisational thinking.

Whilst the cases featured in this study cover a range within the general status hierarchy of universities, this in itself was not the key to case selection.

In using careers services as the “gateways” to understanding institutional approaches to employability, the notion of non-extended (with a focus on a narrow range of activities, principally information advice and guidance for individual students and interaction with employers) and extended careers services (a broader remit encompassing related activities such as work placements, volunteering and co-curricular skills development) was a particularly helpful concept in determining the number and identity of the institutions upon which to base the case studies. Developments in the sector in the time since the publication of the Watts and Bucher article in 2008 had made it possible for the author to nuance the binary extended/non-extended distinction to envisage a continuum with several points along it. The hypothesis was that selecting institutions with careers services in different positions and trajectories along the continuum could provide the essential “window” into differing institutional approaches for the purposes of this enquiry.

The key points/categories along the continuum are:

1. Non -extended-consolidated
2. Moving from non-extended to extended
3. Extended-consolidated
4. Moving from extended to integrated (Integrated means an institution-wide organisation, incorporating central service and academic units)

It was possible to identify potential case studies which combined the presence and availability of managers well placed to provide the narrative, with representation of each of the four key points on the non-extended to extended/integrated continuum described above. In this regard, four in-depth case studies would have covered all four points. However, a fifth was included on the basis of perceived trajectory. As a result, there are two case studies in the category of moving from non-extended to extended and one of these was a particularly topical example which appeared to be on a rapid trajectory from non-extended to integrated.

The notion of rapid trajectory relates to another factor which was incorporated in term of case study coverage, namely the known pace of change at the time of the study. As the terms "moving" and "consolidated" might suggest, the pace of change

as reflected in the perceived impact on the careers services varied and the case studies covered the range from low through medium to high in this respect.

Two of the institutions were seen as particularly interesting subjects on the basis of topicality. At the time of the study, they were making highly visible investments and changes to the configuration of their employability operations. More than any others at the time, these two institutions were seen as “movers and shakers” in the employability arena and it would have seemed remiss to conduct a study of this nature without reference to these two institutions, if it was feasible to include them. One of these was the institution included specifically because of the perceived rapid trajectory along the non-extended to integrated continuum. The other was the only true example at the time of category 4 moving from extended to integrated. In terms of the positioning of the key participants, both the HoCs were (and are) the direct agents of strategically driven change in the employability area. To all intents and purposes they were the key, senior individuals through which the institutions’ approaches to employability were being enacted and were therefore perfectly positioned to tell the story of employability for the purposes of this study. Both of these key individuals were willing to engage with the project.

Crucially, the HoCs chosen for this study were prepared to be open to discussion of matters about which some others who were considered were rather more guarded (on the not unreasonable grounds of competitive advantage). Equally, the HoCs in all cases were sufficiently senior, established and confident not to feel any need to put a gloss on their accounts in order to impress the author. This was a perceived issue amongst some potential but unused participants. These criteria relating to the provision of an open and straightforward account were applied to and satisfied by all the participating HoCs.

As outlined earlier, all of the institutions were seen as interesting and useful for the purposes of this study because the known positioning of their careers services represented all of different points along the non-extended to integrated continuum. The order of the case studies reflects the known position on the continuum at the time of the study.

The university in case study 1 had an individual student service focussed non-extended careers service and is an example of category 1 non-extended consolidated. Case study 2 was an example of a category 2 service which was

being deliberately moved from non-extended to extended, whilst case study 3 was a very strong example of a category 3 consolidated extended service (indeed, one of the most comprehensive, extended services in the country). Case 4 was an example of very recent movement into category 2 at the time, but with very clear signals of intent to move rapidly to category 4. Finally, case study 5 was at the time of the study, the one clear example of category 4, moving from extended to integrated.

The identified HoCS all inspired confidence in terms of providing open and straightforward accounts. They were also all able to provide an important element of confirmation of high-level institutional strategic intent. As will be apparent in the detail, the nature and seniority of the roles of the HoCS in case studies 4 and 5 meant that they were direct representatives of institutional intent. The universities in case studies 1 and 3 provided additional access to a “strategy owner” at PVC level, whilst in case study 2 it was possible to interview the external panel member on the review which resulted in the appointment of the current HoCs at that institution in the context of the strategy and direction of travel now being pursued.

Having established that “representativeness” through known labels such as mission group and region was not practical or likely to generate the evidence required the case study selection strategy for this project focussed on the likelihood of obtaining the most complete narratives of institutional approaches to employability, allied to a sampling approach which was based on the idea that the known positioning of careers services might suggest differing approaches to the configuration of the employability offer in relation to the research question. The selection criteria were essentially pragmatic, within an overall intent to produce case studies which may prove interesting in relation to the research question on the grounds that starting points and the pace of change appeared to vary and that all the principal points of variation on the non-extended to integrated continuum could be covered.

### **Data collection and analysis:**

The first exercise in building up the case studies for each institution was a review of published strategies and related statements with a view to the clarification of high-level institutional aims relating to employability.

The purpose was to establish some evidence upon which to start to understand the institutional strategic context in which the managers with a particular responsibility

for employability (the HoCS) are required to operate. In relation to the research question, the hope was that this evidence would offer some contribution to understanding the ways in which the institution's employability offer is conceptualised and measured. It was anticipated that some or all of the universities would publish delivery strategies at a greater level of detail than top line "vision" documents or strategy maps, which would suggest something of the "how" as well as the "what" and describe to some degree how the employability offer is constructed and measured at a more detailed level. It was hoped rather than anticipated, that some institutions may also allude to the "who" in term of roles and responsibilities, thereby shedding light on how the offer is managed, and the choices being made about the configuration of resources although this was seen as more likely to come from the interview data.

The other key element in building up the case studies was the interview data. The interviews were designed to follow through on the intended strategy- to- delivery coverage. The interviews covered all the areas of the research question, including the ways in which the employability offer is conceptualised and measured but with more emphasis on the "how" and the "who" in terms of the ways in which the offer is constructed and managed and the relevant resources configured.

The documentary evidence was interrogated and the interviews conducted on the same basis in relation to the research question. This was to seek to determine what the university seeks to achieve in relation to employability, including what it seeks to achieve in this regard, relative to other universities (the "what"-the ways in which employability is conceptualised and measured), how its aims in relation to employability are to be realised (the "how"-the delivery strategy and any more detailed measures) and roles, identities and functions of the key players in delivering the strategy (the "who" and the configuration of resources, with particular reference to the role of the HoCS and the careers service). The interviews were semi-structured in that they were based on the clear agenda of the research question as detailed above and did not take the form of a checklist or the collection of short answers to a substantial number of closed questions. This approach to gathering interview data could be criticised as being insufficiently objective and/or standardised. It is quite true that the interview data, particularly in the case of the HoCS interviews were gathered through guided conversations however, they were very focussed conversations, adhering closely to the "what, how, who" schedule. This is not intended as a defence of the semi structured interview against a



methodologically “superior” positivist approach. Rather this is a suggestion that this was a considered approach to that which is most appropriate to the nature of the enquiry. This was a study of complex social systems in which it was possible to construct the framework of the research question and the “what, how and who?” agenda in advance but with a fundamental assumption that the systems would be very likely to be developing differently in each case, within a group deliberately chosen for their differing starting points. A detailed, structured interview checklist was neither appropriate nor desirable for the purpose.

The approach borrowed from the realist methodology championed by Pawson (1996) and echoed by Kazi (2003) which asks the question “what works for whom and under what circumstances?” Pawson and Kazi both look at the evaluation of “human service programmes” (usually in the areas of health and social care) and take the view that these are open systems with many intervening and context specific factors likely to mean that programmes which are similar or even identical in purpose will play out differently in different organisational contexts.

This was a piece of practitioner research and the interaction, particularly in the case of the HoCs interviews was between practitioners (indeed peers), although the interviewer was adopting the identity of practitioner researcher for the purpose of the study. The selection of HoCs interviewees able to provide an open and honest account as described earlier, was crucial. It was equally crucial that the interviewer ensured that whilst the nature of the interviews was conversational, they did not become the sort of “me too” two-way conversation which might occur in the normal run of professional networking. Whilst it was possible and useful to engage in a degree of iterative sense-making, which would have been impossible had the interviewer not been a peer practitioner, this was not a collaborative enquiry. The clear and understood basis of the interviews was that the flow of information would be from interviewee to interviewer, on the basis of anonymity and appropriate sharing of the findings with the participants and the broader professional community.

Although the schedule and agenda were consistent, the practical detail of the interview data collection varied slightly with starting points and perceived nature and pace of change across the institutions. In the two cases (1 and 3) of consolidated careers service positioning, there were single interviews with a Pro Vice Chancellor and the HoCs in each case. In the cases of changing careers service positioning (2, 4 and 5), the interviews were with the HoCs as the identified agents of change. In

each case there was an initial interview and a follow up interview in order to clarify understanding of the changes taking place. In case 2 interview data was also obtained from the external member of the careers service review panel, which determined the desired direction of the service in advance of the appointment of the current HoCS who was brought in to pursue that direction. This was useful as the role of the HoCs (at least at the outset) was not as overtly driven by overall institutional strategy as in cases 4 and 5.

The interviews were distributed as follows:

Case 1: Interview with Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) as “strategy owner” and interview with the HoCS

Case 2: Interview with the external member of the careers service review panel, initial interview and follow up interview with the HoCS

Case 3: Interview with Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning, Teaching and Student Experience) as “strategy owner” and interview with the HoCS.

Case 4: Initial interview and follow up interview with the HoCS

Case 5: Initial interview and follow up interview with the HoCS.

Interview notes were taken and kept in case files for each institution. In the case studies themselves, the data are presented in the "what, how, who" format with contributions in each from the various sources.

In addition to the categories of conceptualised, constructed, measured and managed linked to “what, how and who”, the data were also analysed in terms of key drivers, which emerged from the data collection. These were directly related to positional/status competition between institutions and/or positional/status returns to students. The categories relating to position/status were: Character/identity (statements which suggest employability as being linked to “the kind of university we are.”), Positioning (statements relating employability to favourable positioning/ranking in relation to other universities, The Offer (statements relating to the employability/career benefits to students /graduates of the university).

The interviews allowed for greater insight into resource configuration and particularly into the internal view of the pace of change. This facilitated additional analysis in relation to important emerging categories, specifically the distinction between employability being "important" and being "an issue" (a problem to be fixed) and the

level of executive determination to pursue a particular path in relation to employability. The data were examined through the lens of positional competition and the application of this to the notion of institutional identity in terms of "employability identity" was a very useful category to emerge.

Using the HoCS as the key interview participants, based on a sampling mechanism which reflects the key points along the continuum from non-extended to integrated career services generated evidence with which to test the hypothesis that the positioning of careers services provides a particularly useful "window" into the differing interpretations and organisational responses to the issue of employability as a function of positional/status competition.

Having explained the basic rationale for using the case study approach and for the choice of the cases, it is important to describe in more detail, the ways in which case study methodology was applied. In order to do this, it is necessary to begin with a re-statement or reinforcement of the appropriateness of the method. In addition to Soy's point about "how" and "why" questions, referred to earlier, Yin (2009) suggests that circumstances are appropriate for the use of case studies when there is no requirement for the control of behavioural events, as would be the case in an experiment and where the focus is on contemporary events, unlike a history. In a quotation which applies directly to the research question for this study Schramm (1971) said

*"The essence of a case study, the central tendency amongst all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented and with what result."* (Schramm 1971 p.6)

I find myself in strong agreement with Simons (2009) who suggested that case study methodology is essentially about approach and purpose, which then determine the methods for data gathering, rather than a "method" per se. She also stressed the importance of "the story of the case" which is certainly central to the importance of the narratives of employability sought in this study.

Central to the explanation of the choice and implementation of case study methodology is the position of the author in relation to the enquiry. The author is a member of the professional community to which the principal interview participants (the HoCS) belong. Within my own institution I occupy the sort of organisational

position which would have made me a likely candidate for inclusion had someone else been conducting this study. During the last ten years or so, I have had some involvement in training HoCS, principally as the lead tutor on the AGCAS strategy course and in that regard, I am perhaps more likely to be the person conducting the study. Whilst I find my own professional environment of intrinsic interest; my purpose is instrumental rather than intrinsic (Stake 2005). I wanted to try to develop better understanding of emerging patterns in contemporary events in order to inform my own local practice and my contribution to national discourse.

In discussing the origins of cases, Thomas (2011) refers to the following kinds of case studies: “Key case”-a good example, a classic or exemplary case, “outlier case”-showing something interesting because it is different from the norm and “local knowledge case”- an example of something in the researcher’s personal experience about which he/she wants to find out more. To some extent the “local knowledge” label could be said to apply to the topic of the enquiry although this was clearly not a study of the author’s own institution. Given the fundamental purposes of the enquiry, the notion of key cases has some resonance in that it was the intention that the chosen cases would be exemplary in the sense of being clear and interesting examples (without necessary being judged as exemplary in the sense that they are models which other should follow). Arguably, cases 4 and 5 might have been seen as “outlier” cases in terms of the known scale and pace of change at those institutions compared to the perceived norm.

Discussion of the application of case study methodology usually involves consideration of the degree to which the approach is evaluative, explanatory or exploratory. If evaluation is taken to mean “research to see how well something is working or has worked” (Thomas 2011) there is certainly an element of this in the cases included in this study, although it was not the primary intention. The primary purpose was explanatory in the sense of attempting to understand the ways in which the interactions of key factors such as environment, values and resources and the fundamental issue of positional competition appear to have driven organisational configuration, rather than to evaluate the impact of the resulting configuration. However, as the studies took place over a period of time during which key performance indicators were published, there was a certain evaluative element in the sense that there were indications of the extent to which institutional strategy was being realised in terms of those measures. Nonetheless, the cases were not thorough evaluations. If that had been the intention, then it would arguably have

been much too soon after the adoption of the new organisational forms in cases 3 and 5 and the very new change to the role of the HoCs in case 2, to carry out an evaluation. As a piece of practitioner research, the position of the researcher in relation to the enquiry would suggest that this was not a truly exploratory piece in which the researcher has little preliminary knowledge of the issue (Thomas 2011) even though some of the patterns identified were genuinely emergent from the conduct of the study.

In this study, context was of great importance. Not only were the national policy and market contexts significant, but the institutional context as a factor in itself and crucially as the lens through which the external contexts are viewed and interpreted was also hugely significant. The observed phenomenon of this or that organisational configuration makes sense only when the contexts are understood, to the extent that the organisational action and internal and external contexts are inextricably linked. This was the study of real life phenomena in depth but acknowledging the importance of context and taking it into account as suggested by Yin and Davies (2007). This holistic approach was, as explained earlier, key to identifying participants who were well positioned to help to create the complete narrative. This approach is also key to the successful application of case study methodology because the study was a study of social systems, rather than isolated variables. In this case, the study was of purposive systems, with the purpose being the delivery of employability by English universities within a particular context.

Although not directly applied as a model, the approach to this study had significant similarities to “soft systems methodology” (Checkland 1981), linked to the systems view taken by Pawson and Kazi in relation to realist evaluation of programmes, which was mentioned earlier. This way of thinking maintains the wholeness of observed phenomena and context, whilst mitigating the potential fuzziness of the holistic approach by locating the analysis in relation to “a system to do something” within a given context. In this way, soft systems methodology links the external, contextual factors outlined in the introductory chapter, with the internal strategic environment and related choices and actions described in the case studies and subsequent cross case analysis. Checkland described six features of the situation as a system, using the acronym CATWOE:

Customers-those who benefit from the system

Actors-people who transform inputs into outputs (primarily the HoCS in this study)

Transformation-form this to that, inputs to outputs etc.

“Weltanschauung”-the broader context and world views (as described in the introductory chapter)

Owners-people who own the problem and want it resolved (the strategy owners)

Environment-the constraints set up by the environment.

Although not spelled out using this language, all of these features of the situation as a system were included in this study.

I have suggested that this was essentially an instrumental study, undertaken with a predominantly explanatory intent. These intentions naturally raise the questions of reliability, validity and generalisability. An attempt has been made here to consider the tactics adopted in this study in relation to the key tests of the quality of case study research design put forward by Yin (2009). However, it should be acknowledged that there are proponents of case study research, such as Thomas who see the constructs of reliability and validity as more or less irrelevant in the case study situation, going as far as to suggest that the researcher need not “worry” about these. (Thomas 2011).

The first of Yin’s key tests is that of construct validity, which he describes as identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied. In this study the attempt to do this was represented by the systematic use of the categories of analysis in each of the case studies (in the context of what was intended to be a clear research question):

The tactics advised by Yin to ensure construct validity in case studies were applied in this study. They are the use of multiple sources of evidence, the establishment of chains of evidence (explicit links among the questions asked, data collected and conclusions drawn).

The second test is of internal validity, seen as applicable to explanatory studies (such as this one) and not to descriptive or exploratory studies because such attempts at explanation need to guard against threats to internal validity such as concluding a causal relationship between say x and y without acknowledging the possibility that some third factor may have caused y to happen. The principal

suggested tactics for dealing with this issue revolve around various interpretations of “pattern matching” comparing an empirically based pattern with a predicted one or with alternative predictions, with the suggestion that these tactics can be applied with good effect in cross case analyses of multiple cases. Again, these tactics have been applied in this study, especially in the cross case analysis, for example where examples of potential similarities between institutions are compared with competing explanations and a judgement made about the relative strength of the explanations.

Yin appears to use the term “external validity” in a way which is interchangeable with the notion of “generalisability” saying that this is “the problem of knowing whether a study’s findings are generalisable beyond the immediate case study.” He states that critics of case studies on the grounds of generalisability mistakenly apply the basis applied to survey research in which a sample is intended to generalise to “a larger universe” on the basis of statistical generalisation, whereas case studies rely on analytical generalisation in which the investigator is attempting to generalise a particular set of results to some broader theory. This was certainly the case in this study. The application in this case included examples of literal replication- the instances of employability-added identities (cases 2, 3, 4 and 5) produced situations in which the careers services was core to the institutional approach to employability and theoretical replication-the university with an employability-intrinsic identity produced a situation in which the careers services was non-core, thereby producing a different result for anticipatable reasons. Similarly the idea that high levels of issue awareness generate conditions for change produced replication in (cases 2, 4 and 5) whereas the low levels of issue awareness in cases 1 and 3 coincided with stability and equilibrium (different results for anticipatable reasons). The process also contained elements of what Yin would describe as the iterative process of explanation building as the explanatory categories were emergent from the conduct of the study, as distinct from the pre-selection of cases to produce literal and/or theoretical replication.

The central premise of reliability is that a subsequent enquiry by another researcher conducting the same case study over again would arrive at the same findings and conclusions. Yin’s suggestion that the principal tactics to employ are to document the process and to make as many steps as operational as possible seem reasonable and non-controversial. However, there is an argument that reliability in this case could potentially be affected by a combination of changes over time and the identity of the researcher. This study was a piece of practitioner research and to

a large degree an interpretive enquiry *“an approach that assumes an in-depth understanding and deep immersion in the environment of the subject”* (Thomas 2011). Whilst it could be argued that the theoretical categories developed may be sufficiently robust for a subsequent enquiry to draw anticipatable findings where the institutional position in relation to one of the categories had changed over time the researcher carrying out the subsequent study would need to be sufficiently informed about the environment in order to recognise the change.

Ethics are important considerations for any research project, but Thomas suggests that *“it is especially important to consider ethics in case study research since you may be closely involved with the research participants.”* In this case, the author was not closely involved with the research participants in the sense that they were students or service users, but some of them (the HoCS) were direct, professional peers. In all cases, the interview participants were involved on the basis of explicit, informed consent. In all cases, but especially in the cases of where there was follow up work, the involvement was iterative as particular points were fed back and clarified. The HoCS took part on the understanding that the cases would be anonymised and that information provided would be used in the context of the study itself and appropriate sharing of findings within the professional community.

Making the cases anonymous was a challenge. As the researcher/author, I was acutely aware of the fact that the participating HoCS and I are members of a relatively small and well networked professional community. As case studies of this nature necessarily blend context and observed phenomena, the essential contextual information in the cases inevitably provides clues to the identity of the institutions and by, extension, the HoCS themselves. This may be particularly true for the cases which were generally topical at the time. In producing this work for the purposes of academic accreditation, the issue of anonymity raises some very practical considerations in terms of referencing. Documentary evidence which was publically available via institutional websites was taken as being in the public domain, but is not explicitly referenced as the url immediately identifies the institution. Whilst this could be managed within the relatively closed process of thesis presentation and examination, it needs to be carefully considered in the context of further publication of or derived from, this work.

Whilst acknowledging the challenge of anonymity, it is important to be realistic about the balance of risk in terms of the potential consumers of this work. The risk of



instant identification from the clues in the cases diminishes rapidly for any readership outside the immediate professional circle of HoCS. Even within that group, the varied level of awareness of and connection with the strategic subject matter mitigates the risk to some degree. There is a regularly expressed concern within the HoCS population about the implications for management succession brought about by the apparent lack of interest in management issues and roles amongst the broader AGCAS membership of practitioners. This is a phenomenon to which the author can attest as the leader of one of the largest university careers services in the UK. Again, this mitigates the risk to the principle of anonymity in this study. As the researcher I am very close to the subject matter and sufficiently interested in the topic to conduct research into it and write a thesis about it. I would suggest that I would very probably have been able to identify most if not all of the institutions from the clues in the cases, had I not been the author, but it is important for me to acknowledge that I would be in a tiny minority of the readership. This is not to suggest for a moment that the *outcomes* of the research are unimportant or uninteresting to a broader audience, but realistically, the proportion of that audience with sufficient prior interest in the detailed *background* to the research to make the necessary connections to undermine anonymity would be very small. However small the risk, it is one which needs to be considered as the principle of anonymity rightly formed part of the “contract” between me as the researcher and those who have opted to take part in the study in good faith.

Perhaps the most significant mitigation of the risk to anonymity is that as the cases have been developed and analysed and conclusions drawn, it has become apparent that in their various ways, each of the cases is an example of relative success, even though tensions and contradictions are acknowledged. In terms of further dissemination of the work, it will be possible to enter into discussion with the HoCS who took part in the study, with a view to the possibility of removing the need for anonymity altogether on the grounds that the subjects of the case studies are unlikely to object to being held up as identifiable example of good practice (although they have every right to do so and to have that right respected).

From a personal perspective, this work has a high degree of practical adequacy and has already begun to inform my own practice in my own institution. The combination of the insights arising from the study and my ongoing interest in the subject matter leads me to apply the explanatory categories from the study to my view of other

institutions and sectoral trends and I would look to do this and encourage the audience to do so in any further dissemination.

The application of the insights from the study can have both positive and negative implications. For example, the cases in the study itself could be seen as positive examples where the convergence of the key factors identified appears to have produced an organisational approach which is successful. On the other hand a converse interpretation could be applied. What might be happening in institutions where the key factors, particularly employability identity and issue awareness are not fitting together in the way that they appear to do in the case studies? It seemed to me that there was value in terms of practical adequacy for the reader, to include some reference to a case in point, where, on the basis of my study I could suggest an example of an institution in which a high level of issue awareness produced an organisational approach to employability which would appear to be more applicable to a different employability identity than that which might be presumed for the institution in question. Using a direct illustration would not have been ethically appropriate in my view because the institution in question would not have been one of the case studies and would therefore not have consented to take part, nor would there be the depth of evidence upon which to base observations. Given earlier comments about a small professional circle the institution could be readily identifiable to some of the HoCS audience (although the caveat about balance of risk would still apply).

The compromise adopted was to draw on a known to the author (but not studied in depth) example to suggest a more general scenario in which key factors identified in the study may not be aligned as they are in the case study examples and to raise questions about traditionally perceived employability identities. The purpose of this was to assist the reader to begin to see ways in which the explanatory categories might be applied beyond the featured case studies, whilst suggesting that this might best be done on the basis of a more complete narrative such as might be generated by a case study of the chosen institution(s).

## **Chapter 3: The Case Studies.**

### **3.1: Case study 1**

#### **3.1.1: Background:**

This is a medium sized “new” university. It is a former polytechnic, with a vocational tradition and ethos, summed up in its corporate “strap line” which is “Inspiring Tomorrow’s Professionals. The positioning of the careers service in this case is category 1: non-extended and the perceived pace of change in organisational configuration at the time of the study was low.

#### **3.1.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy:**

##### **What is to be achieved?**

The university is one of a small number in the UK to set out its overarching institutional strategy in the form of a “strategy map” (Kaplan and Norton 1996 and 2004). The strategy map has the university’s vision at the top. This reads as follows: “To be an inspiring, innovative university of international renown.” The vision is followed by the mission: “To deliver an accessible and inspirational learning experience, to undertake pioneering research and professional practice, and to engage fully with employers and the community” and the university’s declared values: “Ambition, Student focussed, Pioneering, Integrity, Respect, Excellence (ASPIRE)”

Whilst it could be argued that the development of graduates does not feature explicitly in the university's mission, the production of employable graduates is however, a clearly declared aim elsewhere in the strategy map and could be said to be implicit in the “Inspiring Tomorrows professional” strap line, which suggests that the development of employable graduates is fundamental to the university’s identity. This was confirmed by the Pro Vic Chancellor for Learning and Teaching,

*“Employability runs through the university like the word Blackpool in a stick of rock.”  
(Pro Vice Chancellor case 1)*

The map continues with brief statements illustrating stakeholder expectations (labelled “S”) and university aims (labelled “A”). At the stakeholder level (S1)

students can expect “An education that challenges and creates excellent career opportunities.” This expectation is linked to the vocational/applied origins and ethos of the university through statement S2, which states that students can expect to “learn from staff at the leading edge of knowledge *and application*” (*my emphasis*). There is a declared intent to be attractive to students seeking this particular type of education as the university seeks to position itself as “the university of choice for ambitious students seeking high quality *professionally oriented* (*my emphasis*), accessible undergraduate and post graduate taught courses.” University strategy, as distinct from marketing statements suggests very strongly that this is an institution which overtly seeks to convey positional returns in terms of employability to its students. The use of the word “accessible” in this context relates to the fact that in the overall status competition between UK universities, this institution is generally a recruiter rather than a selector.

### **3.1.3: Competitive strategy:**

#### **What is to be achieved in positional competition with other institutions?**

At the level of aims, the university seeks “to produce employable and enterprising graduates” (aim A7). This aim is part of a cluster linked to aim A6 “enhancing our standing.” As implied by the term “enhance our standing”, the aim A7 is about comparison with other institutions and therefore, has a league table basis. The declared aim is “top half of the league tables by 2013.” The league tables in question are based on the “graduate prospects” (percentage into graduate-level employment) score. The PVC indicated that this measure was based on the university’s realistic aspirations in relation to positional competition.

*“This measure was arrived at through consideration of a combination of analysing the performance of a cluster of peer institutions and considering the university’s own ambitions and trajectory to arrive at an achievable target.” (PVC case 1)*

There is clear intent that success in employability will make a positive contribution to the university’s performance in status competition.

It could be argued that the university strap-line and aim A7 “to produce employable and enterprising graduates” reflect a sense of employability as capability, engendered by the education offered by this university as suggested by the stakeholder statements S1 described above. There is a sense of “employability for

all” as a natural feature of the educational offer. The suggestion could be that any student engaging actively and effectively with this education should emerge with workplace-relevant professional knowledge and skills because that is the fundamental point of the exercise. It is the translation of these aims and statement through the filter of “enhancing our standing” which turns them from absolute, input-driven to relative, output-driven aspirations. This filter takes aspirations driven by ethos and identity (Values) and capability in terms of staff and programmes (Resources) and adds the dimension of measurement based on outcomes, relative to those of other institutions in a marketised higher education sector (Environment).

In essence, this university appears to set out to define success in relation to employability in output terms through the application of a metric which uses the DLHE-generated percentage into graduate-level destinations at six months as a recognised national standard for comparing institutions, thereby creating a direct link between the aim of producing employable graduates and issues of standing and reputation, relative to other universities, as suggested by the link between aims A6 (standing) and A7 (employable graduates) on the university’s strategy map. Not only is the successful execution of the corporate strategy in relation to employability an exercise in fulfilling the promise of identity by delivering the kind of education and by extension, employability outcomes that the university would expect of itself, it is also a way in which the “organisations competitive position can be related to market attractiveness” (Johnson and Scholes 1993). This clearly reflects the duality of positional/status competition with employability success conveying benefit to student and university alike. The idea of being the university of choice for students seeking this kind of education also reflects the notion of co-production.

#### **3.1.4: Delivery: How will the strategic aims be realised?**

In terms of operationalising the ways in which aim A7 will be delivered, the university does not have an overt, published strategy for employability. What it does have, however, is a Teaching and Learning Strategy, which appears to be rooted in the vocational and close- to- practice ethos of the institution. The strategy appears to be based upon the delivery of vocationally oriented education, through academics whose work is close to application and professional practice. The strategy has three over arching aims which are as follows:

To deliver inspirational teaching and learning, to provide opportunities for all who can benefit and to produce employable and enterprising graduates. The metric relating to being in the top half of the destinations league tables is the stated measure of success for the third (employability) aim.

The relevant inputs or enablers described in the strategy are very much in line with the vocational ethos of the institution. The statements relating to the curriculum are about professional relevance and connection to employers. They are not about the delivery of additional “employability skills” as favoured by the authors of policy reports such as “Future Fit” (UUK/CBI 2009)

On the input side, the declared strategy is to provide an overtly employer/industry relevant education, to students who want that kind of education, with related measures of these inputs, (accreditation, contracts with employers/professional bodies, all courses delivering work-related elements, more than 1000 sandwich placements per annum etc). In discussing the strategy, the PVC alluded to the fact that the university had spotted the danger of recessionary pressure on its ability to maintain its sandwich placement offer, which is seen as an important market differentiator and had successfully maintained the offer even in difficult employment market conditions, retaining its position as one of the top ten sandwich education providers in the country. The PVC himself is a Historian and a former Dean of one of the university’s arts and humanities-based schools. The PVC was able to draw on direct personal experience of delivering what may be seen as less vocational subjects in the spirit which runs through the university’s identity-based strategy as far as employability is concerned and point to employment outcomes for history which appear to vindicate the approach.

It may be reasonable to describe the output measure as driven by the external, competitive environment, whereas the inputs appear to be driven more by values, reflecting performance relative to self and public image as a certain kind of university, with the assumption that success in the latter will lead to success in the former. In Marginson's terms, this is not one of the universities which would generally benefit from the "educated guesses" about high prestige and commensurate positional returns , but it might benefit from assumptions that a university like this would be likely to convey positional benefits in terms of employment outcomes through its close to market, applied nature. Strategically, the university sets out to validate this identity-based assumption.

The university seems to have a clear idea of what employability success looks like in terms of a top-level measure. The linking of the aim A7 into the cluster around “enhancing our standing” (A6) enables the measure to be couched in relative (to other institutions) terms-“top half of the league table.” Arguably, this avoids the problem of being hostage to the state of the market at any given time. Making the measure about performance relative to other institutions, as distinct from a specific level of performance, effectively makes the measure about “market share” of graduate level destinations, whatever the state of the overall market at the time. The notion of market share of available graduate level destinations tends to reflect Marginson's "remorseless logic of zero sum" and Brown and Hesketh's supply and demand arguments, rather than the idea of elastic, burgeoning demand created by the knowledge economy.

### **3.1.5: Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the Careers service (HoCS):**

In federal, devolved organisations like universities, accountability for the achievement of key performance outcomes is often devolved to the Strategic Business Units (SBUs). In universities, the SBUs are typically the core academic units of organisation whether they are labelled faculties, schools (as in this case), colleges, institutes or departments, with the aggregate of their performance effectively adding up to the performance of the institution as a whole.

In this case, the PVC made it absolutely clear that the learning and teaching strategy identifies the core educational experience as the mechanism for delivering employability success and therefore allocates accountability unequivocally to (the Deans of) the academic schools. The “inputs” to employability success are devised and delivered by the schools and they are accountable for them. The employability measure is included amongst the school Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for which the Deans are directly accountable to the Vice Chancellor. Given these circumstances and the ethos and history of the university, it is no surprise that the deans put school resources into the infrastructure which supports employability through the delivery of the core educational experience. The most obvious manifestation of this is the professional placement units which exist in most of the schools, providing school based employability operations which exist alongside the central professional careers service.

The careers and employability service is a central service whose role and resources are devoted entirely to employability but which exists outside, (but alongside) the strategy and the declared delivery structure. The service is not referred to by name in the L&T strategy other than to say that “student services” (of which the careers service is a part) is one of the cross university functions supporting the delivery of the L&T strategy in ways unspecified. In this sense, the service is positioned by the strategy as an enabler, providing an institution-wide service which each of the academic schools can draw upon in order to pursue their objectives in ensuring their contribution to the overall aim of “producing enterprising and employable graduates” to the degree which will ensure that on this measure, the university is “in the top half of the league tables by 2013.” It is also positioned as a student service for the benefit of individual students seeking help in realising their personal, positional returns in terms of career success.

It could be argued that this positioning in relation to the learning and teaching strategy might cause the HoCS to feel somewhat alienated. After all, he heads the central service in the university dedicated to the pursuit of employability and the word employability is even part of the service’s name, yet the unit does not even rate a mention in what appears to be the university’s core/only strategy for the delivery of success in this area. The documentary evidence appears to provide no strategic recognition that the service is part of the “how” and the “who” of the delivery of employability, which is itself seen as strategically significant by the university. This was not the case however. Instead, the HoCS reported a strong sense of identification with the university’s mission and corporate goals, not through the learning and teaching strategy, but through the strategy map.

The HoCS described what he felt to be a very strong connection between the service level strategy and operational plans of the careers and employability service and the specific stakeholder level aim in the university strategy map.

*“Our activities link directly to aim A7 of the University’s Strategy Map, to produce employable and enterprising graduates.” (HoCS case 1)*

The HoCS reports that there is a direct line of congruence of values between the A7 strategy map aim and the core values of the service and the people in it, in terms of what they believe that they are there to do. There is little or no “translational” (from corporate goals to staff motivation) work for the HoCS to do in this regard. The face-



value straightforwardness of the A7 declaration and its common-sense link to the work of the service enables the HoCS to frame all of the service's activities as inputs to institutional aims for success in employability, in ways which resonate positively with the dominant professional values of the staff and to deploy resources accordingly. On the face of it, Environment, Values and Resources (EVR) are well-aligned in this case. The HoCS and his staff feel that they are professionals concerned with student employability, working in an institution which is also concerned with student employability. They feel that they have a particular role to play in a larger community effort.

Organisationally, the careers and employability service is cast as a component of "student services" - central support services to students as individual members of the university community, regardless of their "academic home." Whilst there may be every expectation that such a central support service would contribute in its own way to strategy map goals concerned with employability, there seems to be no formally stated expectation that a service, which sits outside the core educational experience, would have a role to play in shaping learning and teaching strategy, even where employability is one of the three overarching aims of that strategy. However, the connection to a key element of performance of the academic SBUs might be expected to create demand on the resources of the careers and employability service as an enabler in support of the academic schools' delivery of the employability aspects of the learning and teaching strategy. The HoCS reports that this is indeed the case in some areas and the PVC suggested that this is a growing phenomenon. The HoCS also reported a strong element of "supply push" from the service itself. In describing the service's (specifically the careers adviser team) aims

*"The team this year had a clear focus on expanding their presence in each of the academic schools with the intention of raising the profile of the (careers and employability) service, promoting employability and therefore working towards the service and university strategic aim to produce employable and enterprising graduates."* (HoCS case 1)

From the HoCS's point of view, working in and with the academic schools enables "reach" to student audiences on their academic home territory in ways which may well engage some students who would not necessarily make active use of a central service. In other words, this approach enables the service to deliver its "student

service” (in pursuit of the A7 strategy map aim) to more students than might be the case if the only face –to-face offer was physically located in the central service. From the schools’ perspective, bringing the service into the schools is a way of making intelligent use of an institutionally provided resource, which they fund through the "top slicing" of their income, in pursuit of the employability success for which the schools are ultimately accountable in the context of the L&T strategy. From the HoCS' perspective the “demand pull” from the schools and “supply push” from the service reflects a logical division of labour.

The broad community commitment to employability can present problems for the service. The core, close to practice, employer-linked educational experience in and of itself is intended/expected to deliver employability, because essentially that is the business of an institution (and its component schools) with this sort of history, ethos and identity. Furthermore, there is a declared intent to recruit students who will actively choose this kind of education and might be assumed to subscribe to this ethos. This could have the combined effect of making the academic school route to student engagement more important for the service, because the students may not be particularly aware of or highly motivated to use the central offering, whilst making access via academic staff more difficult as they may be relatively unaware of the central offering and may not necessarily see how it adds value. The HoCS reports a tight resource environment for central services and commented that the deans of the schools as the holders of the purse strings, would be unlikely to vote additional resources to a central employability service when they are under pressure to demonstrate that they deliver employability themselves through the core educational experience.

*"They won't put resources our way, unless it's for something that we can do more cost-effectively."* (HoCS case 1).

The HoCS finds himself operating at the intersection of some strategic and philosophical contradictions. On one hand, the ethos and identity of the institution help to generate a sense in which it appears absolutely natural that the idea of producing “enterprising and employable graduates” should feature as a strategic aim in the strategy map and this appears to offer significant strategic legitimacy to the existence and work of the service, which exists to pursue this overt institutional goal. On the other hand, the same ethos and identity underpin a delivery strategy which could be seen to position the service as a peripheral enabler. The language of the

learning and teaching strategy does not position the service as a central coordinator, or an expert partner with which the schools are corporately required to work. For the service, there appears to be some dissonance between its apparently strong alignment with the “what” (strategy map aim A7 for institution as a corporate entity) and its much weaker alignment with the “how” (delivery of strategy map aim A7 via the schools as the SBUs for this purpose). However, the PVC reported that the HoCs and his service are valued and respected providers of additionality to the schools’ employability efforts and as providers of key information in terms of performance against the key metrics, with this latter aspect gaining in importance in recent times.

For the HoCS, the positioning outside the mainstream delivery strategy is counterbalanced by positioning at the centre of intelligent discussion of what success looks like, the monitoring of success and crucially, the dissemination of the authoritative information on the degrees to which success is being achieved.

As in the vast majority of UK universities, the careers service in this case is the institutional home for the execution of the annual, mandatory Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey. The DLHE data form the basis of the employability measures used in all the newspaper league tables, the “UNISTATS” section of the Universities Central Admissions System (UCAS) website and the Key Information Sets (KIS). For this institution, employability success is ultimately defined in these comparative terms eg “top half of the league table by 2013.” As the manager responsible for the mandatory collection and the institutional analysis and dissemination of DLHE data the HoCS plays a key role in interpreting and disseminating (to senior management and the broader community) the most important data used to monitor the institution’s performance against a significant institutional aim and target.

The HoCS is positioned to be able to inform senior management (principally the PVC-L&T), not only about progress on collection and performance on the key measures, but also the nuances and shortcomings of the measures themselves. The HoCS reports informed discussion of these issues, a robust avoidance of “game playing” in relation to the submission of the return to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and a pragmatic acceptance that league tables are inescapable features of the higher education landscape and that the DLHE-based league table measures constitute the dominant public-domain measures for a strategic aim on

employability, which is linked to “enhancing our standing” and must therefore be linked to performance measured against that of other institutions.

The institutional environment in which league tables matter seems to be combined with an informed institutional value judgement that whatever the shortcomings, the league tables and the DLHE data which underpin them are the measures which must be used to determine success in relation to employability. In aligning resources the HoCS has secured and deployed additional resources into the analysis, interpretation and dissemination of DLHE-based information, which goes well beyond the basic task of running the survey and submitting the data to HESA. The service has appointed a full time statistics officer. This is a relatively unusual appointment in a small to medium sized careers service (which this is) and in a restricted resource environment, is strong signal of support for the service from the corporate level of the university. It is also an example of an employability activity which the HoCS felt most likely to win support from the internal “tax payers” (the deans) as it is more cost-effectively developed and delivered centrally than in individual Schools..This has in turn, created the capacity to build a system which provides up to date, sophisticated analyses of DLHE data at school and programme level and which can be accessed directly by colleagues around the university, particularly academic colleagues in the university’s schools.

The HoCS reports multiple utility and an alignment of values between the corporate and the professional. On the one hand, the service is providing the key information which informs the university’s leadership and the broader academic community about progress towards the corporate goal relating to employability. On the other hand, this development enhances labour market intelligence, which the professionals in the service see as hugely valuable in underpinning their careers guidance work. Just as the service’s work in and with the academic schools links the otherwise apparently independent efforts of the central service in pursuit of the “A7” aim, the dissemination of the DLHE information creates the basis for evidence-based dialogue between the service and the schools around collaborative working.

Significantly, the way in which the information is made available to the schools is very open. Colleagues in schools are able to access their “own” data directly and to customise reports which might for example, compare performance of programmes with each other or one programme from year to year, or the school with university averages and so on. The open approach means that there is not a “black box”

approach in which the central service seeks or is seen to seek a position of knowledge-based power in relation to the schools. The service is not the corporate “employability police.” Instead there is intelligent discussion about the meaning of the data and action which may be informed by it. This dialogue and collaborative action which may flow from it links the service into the essentially schools-based delivery strategy for employability success. This enables the HoCSto begin to shift the positioning of the service in relation to the schools from peripheral provider of services to individual students to something more akin to that of a business partner, supporting and working with the schools in pursuit of a core business aim.

The system for the analysis and dissemination of DLHE information pre-dated and anticipated the level of granularity that would come with the KIS, providing detailed destination data at the level of the individual degree programme. The move to develop and implement the system was inspired and justified by positional competition. It was conceived as a means of monitoring the success of the university and its constituent elements in achieving outcomes which would contribute towards being in the top half of the league tables on the employability measure. In this case, however, it is crucially important to understand the sense in which the system serves as a means for the validation of identity. Both the PVC and the HoCS conveyed their own sense and the idea of broader community adherence to the authenticity of the university's employability-related mission. They believe that their institution has remained steadfastly true to its Polytechnic roots in a way in which some direct comparator institutions have not. The belief is that staying true to the mission and identity will deliver success in positional/status competition. The system measures the continuing validity of the PVC's "stick of rock" statement about employability at this university.

The notion that the principal means of delivering employability success is and should be, through the core educational experience is a recognised and shared value. The careers and employability service has a value in its own right as a student service and has no difficulty aligning itself with overarching corporate strategy and is increasingly a business partner to the academic SBUs in an identity based eco-system intended to deliver employability success. For the HoCS, positioning as a business partner and trusted adviser at the centre of institutional discussions about what success looks like helps to resolve what might otherwise be a sense of conflict around resourcing. In some other institutions (including others in this study) careers services are being expanded/extended as the universities in

question respond to perceived issues raised by the importance of employability. Employability is undoubtedly important in this case, but does not seem likely to result in the careers service moving any further along the continuum from non-extended to extended and beyond, because a non-extended service ,with the added business partner capability around DLHE information clearly fits appropriately into the whole institution employability eco-system.

The university appears to have achieved its strategic employability goal of being in the top half of the league tables three years ahead of schedule (2010 against a target date of 2013). For this university, performance in employability terms is a source of strength and competitive advantage. By delivering on the promise of identity and declared mission (as distinct from pure perceived status, as Marginson might have seen it), the university succeeds in the coproduction of success with its students in the acquisition of status based positional returns. In terms of being a university of choice for students seeking this type of education, it is inviting potential students to make “educated guesses” on the basis of being an authentic (the PVC’s stick of rock) representation of a particular type of institution, rather than on the basis of pure historical status.

### **3.2: Case study 2:**

#### **3.2.1 Background:**

This is a research intensive "red brick" civic university, which describes itself on its website as having a “particular emphasis on education for the professions” although it does not have the professional/vocational foundation of a former polytechnic or a former College of Advanced technology (CAT). The university is located in an economically challenged part of the country and has one of the strongest records in widening participation in its mission group. The positioning of the careers service is category 2: moving from non-extended to extended, resulting from an institutional review of the service. The perceived pace of change in organisational configuration relating to employability is medium.

### **3.2.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy:**

#### **What is to be achieved?**

The university sets out its high-level vision in its strategic plan 2009-2014. This is an overarching corporate strategy document and as such, focuses on the “what” but not the “how” in any detail. The strategy sets out five key priorities and they are: “improving our research performance, positioning ourselves as a global university, driving knowledge exchange and innovation, enhancing the student experience and enhancing widening participation.” Unsurprisingly reference to employability appears under the student experience priority. There is some reference to involving students in knowledge exchange activities, but this is not the overt expression of student experience inputs as societal impact outputs as is the case in some other universities.

The student experience section sets out what is to be achieved under the headings of “intellectual environment, social and physical environment and excellence in service delivery”. The service delivery element is concerned with overall business processes rather than the operation or involvement of any specific services. Employability features under the intellectual environment heading under which the university makes a commitment to reviewing the content of programmes in order to ensure a number of outcomes one of which is to “enhance employability by delivering skills associated with the (name of the university) graduate.” In defining planned outcomes, the strategy has an unusual and interesting style in that it sets out some “hard” numerical KPIs and a set of expectations which are expressed in terms of what success will look like if the strategy is successfully executed. The planned outcomes with hard KPIs are labelled “key ambitions.” In the student experience section of the strategy, the key ambitions and hard KPIs relate to increasing the post graduate proportion of the student body, overall satisfaction in the National Student Survey and increasing undergraduate applications, conversion rates and market share. Employability features in the expectations, with the university expecting to “create more opportunities for exchanges and placements to enhance the experience of students during their study and enhance their employability” but does not feature in the hard KPIs.

It could be argued that it should not be surprising to find that a university which declares itself as having a particular emphasis on education for the professions should set out its employability ambitions in terms of delivering employability through

the taught programmes, particularly through increasing opportunities for placements within those programmes. Arguably, this approach could be seen to have more in common with that of former CAT universities in the '94 group (research-intensive with a professional orientation), although this university is not one of those.

This orientation is reinforced in one of the illustrative case studies accompanying the strategic plan. The case study is about "the (university) Engineer." This is described in terms of meeting the modern demands of industry by producing the next generation of high-calibre graduate engineer. "Active learning" is a central feature of the programme, with purpose built space and cleared timetables to enable whole-year cohorts of students to work on projects from planning through to final construction. The programme aims to produce engineers with a range of transferable skills and attributes including resourcefulness, adaptability, communication and teamwork. In conclusion, the case study sets out the university's aim to extend the benefits of the University Engineer programme via a "University Graduate" project to the whole university. In summary, it would appear that in the context of the university's identity as one which has a tradition of education for the professions, the strategic approach to employability concentrates on the core educational experience in terms of taught programmes and that a key plank of the strategy is to transfer a successful approach from one academic unit to all the others. This is consistent with the way in which the public-facing Teaching and Learning page on the university's web site, begins by re-stating the ethos of "education for the professions" and goes on to state that "employability is a primary goal for the university across all our subject areas" The Active Learning laboratory, which is a key feature of the University Engineer programme is described as "a faithfully simulated workplace environment in which students can develop industry-ready skills."

The university has a formally approved employability strategy (Strategy for Enhancing Student Employability), although this is not directly referred to in the strategic plan. The University Engineer programme was launched in 2007 and the intention to extend of the concept to the University Graduate more generally was in place and included in the employability strategy. The approval of the employability strategy in April 2008 predates the publication of the university's current strategic plan. Had the sequence been the other way around, the employability strategy might be seen as describing the "how" in relation to the "what" contained in the strategic plan ambitions for employability. The impact of these timing issues was an important



feature of the discussion with the Head of Careers and Employability (the HoCS) who was the author of the employability strategy. This is explored in more detail below.

### **3.2.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in employability in positional competition with other universities?**

A remarkable feature of the high level strategic plan is that whilst it declares ambitions and expectations in relation to employability, they are not couched in competitive terms. As outlined above, there are hard KPIs within the strategy and some of these are based on relative performance and market share, but no such metric is publically applied to employability at this level. Instead, the expectations for employability seem to be about delivering the kind of core educational experience which should be associated with a research intensive but professionally oriented university.

The employability strategy on the other hand does declare some objectives in competitive terms with KPIs, but the language is rather loose. The first two of the five objectives set out in the strategy are expressed in competitive terms. The first is “to establish the University as the region’s leading (mission group) institution for student employability” and the second is “to improve the overall quality of graduates’ first employment destinations as evidenced by improved league-table positioning.” The employability strategy puts forward areas of activity through which the objectives can be realised. The term “improved graduate employment statistics” or slight variations on it are used as whole or part suggested KPIs for four of the nine areas of activity, but there is no specification of what improvement means. By contrast the HoCS reported a developing sense of the university’s strong track record on widening participation being seen a strength and the basis of niche positioning related to the university’s Access Agreement with the Office of Fair Access (OFFA), with its detailed targets.

**3.2.4: How will the strategic aims be realised? Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the careers service (HoCS):** (The "How" and the "Who" are combined in this case as partnership working between the academic SBUs and the central professional service is formally enshrined in the delivery strategy).

The principal vehicle for whole institution employability delivery is undergraduate curriculum review in the context of a clear intention to deliver employability through the core educational experience and to assign responsibility to the academic SBUs. The academic SBUs are being provided with guidance on the "integration of employability into curricula" in the form of a four-stage implementation strategy. The four stages are audit, goal-setting, implementation and review. At each of these stages there is an explicit expectation that the subject area in question will work with the careers and employability service. Included in these expectations is the requirement for the subject areas to produce a subject employability plan with "clear performance targets and measurable outcomes" using consultative support from the careers and employability service.

The general guidance for the integration of employability into curricula and the specific subject-level employability plans which flow from this serve to formalise the relationship between the professional service and the academic SBUs.

*"Subject Employability Plans, once developed, will be used as the basis for planning the allocation of Careers & Employability Service resources. Annual Service Level Agreements (SLAs) will be agreed between departments / faculties and Careers & Employability Service."* (Curriculum review guidance-case 2).

The views of individual academics on the integration of employability into curricula are beyond the scope of this study, though it may be reasonable to assume that they will be mixed. Nonetheless at the level of declared strategy and formal guidance on implementation, it seems clear that the integration of employability through subject level plans, devised, delivered and reviewed in partnership with the careers and employability service are institutional requirements which bring the academic SBUs and the professional service together in a delivery mechanism, which is has a pseudo-contractual basis (the SLAs).

This mechanism drives accountability towards the academic SBUs whilst enshrining the consultancy role of the professional service. The academic SBUs must bring in the professional service and the service must deliver, in support of a plan, which is shared in concept and execution but which remains the *subject* plan in terms of accountability and in terms of the employability offer to current and prospective students.

On the face of it, the notion of driving accountability towards the subject areas in a university which describes itself as a “university for the professions” might be seen as bases for assuming some similarity with case study 1. However, the evidence from this study would tend to counter this idea. The academic SBUs in case study 1 have always been accountable for employability. This accountability is not being driven towards them as it is here. The roles of the careers services are fundamentally different. However well regarded the service is in case 1, it does not have a formally declared role in the delivery of employability via the learning and teaching strategy, whereas the role of the professional service is central to the strategy in this case. The strategy suggests that only those subject plans which visibly involve the professional service through a pseudo-contractual mechanism (the SLA) will be regarded as legitimate and strategically fit for purpose.

In order to fulfil its intended role, the professional service needed to be moved from its starting position as a non-extended service to an extended one. The current HoCS was a new external appointment in 2007, following a formal review of the careers service. Up to that point, the service had been a traditional student service based around one to one careers guidance, with little or no connection to the core educational experience. The review deemed the service to be effectively unfit for purpose and recommended significant change to a more comprehensive employability service (an extended careers service).

*“It was pretty obvious that things needed to change.”* (External member of the review panel-case 2).

The new HoCS was appointed and the service was also re-named as the careers and employability service. Whilst his predecessor had played the role of operational manager of a relatively reactive central service, the HoCS was acutely aware that the post-review expectation of his role was and is that he would play the dual role of leader of the professional service and that of the senior adviser to the broader

university community in relation to employability. The head of careers and employability drafted the employability strategy shortly after his appointment as part of the initial drive to realign the service and to begin to play the dual role.

Conversation with the HoCS made clear the importance of timing issues in understanding the relationship between the “what” and the “how” in relation to the university’s employability intentions. The initial employability strategy was approved in April 2008, whereas the university strategic plan was published in 2009 following the arrival of the (then) new Vice Chancellor. Although the current version of the employability strategy reads as though it describes the “how” in relation to the “what” of the university strategic plan the fact is that the former actually predates the latter. The HoCS explained that his initial employability strategy was a statement of intent following his appointment and was designed to flag up employability issues for high level consideration. In this sense it was intended to prompt further discussion of “what” is to be achieved in relation to employability, which would subsequently be the subject of the “how” in the delivery strategy. At the time of the study the HoCS was working on an updated version of the employability strategy.

In an institution with a declared professional orientation, there may be a reasonable expectation that employability will be delivered through the core educational experience. It might be the case that the careers service in these circumstances could be seen to be and to operate as, a peripheral support service, providing well-received, but essentially reactive services to students taking up the offer and thereby supplementing the mainstream work of the academic units, without being directly engaged with them. There may be an argument to suggest that, as long as the students appeared happy with the central service and it was not too expensive to provide, that this could be seen as an acceptable, almost “natural” state of affairs in a professionally oriented university (although perhaps more so where there are very strong employer engagement/placement units in the academic schools, as is the case in a number of the former CATs). However, the instigation, conduct and outcome of the careers service review suggest that this was not the university’s desired style and positioning of its careers service.

The current HoCS was not at the university at the time of the review but is familiar with its recommendations, as his appointment followed on from it. In addition to the interview with the HoCS, it was also possible to obtain a view from the external

member of the review panel. From both conversations it was clear that the university wanted the careers service to work closely with the academic units on the development of employability in and around the core educational experience. The structural location of the service is interesting in this regard. The service is (and was prior to the review) a unit within a larger grouping of professional services, which are concerned with student development, (as distinct from student welfare support or administration), together with continuing professional development and educational consultancy, both internal and external and the provision of educational opportunities to the broader community, including routes into university study for non traditional learners and public engagement with the work of the university. The grouping also incorporates the graduate school, which coordinates all of the skills training for post graduate research students across the university and an educational development section, the institutional home of the support for the university's long-established personal development planning (PDP) system.

The service group is part of the academic secretary's office, which contains other groupings which are more concerned with what might be seen as administrative and regulatory matters. So, for example, the educational development service within the same grouping as the careers and employability service is concerned (amongst other things) with the provision of the staff development and accredited training which enables staff to undertake and develop excellent teaching and learning, whereas the teaching quality support division of the academic secretary's office is concerned with the quality assurance mechanisms which govern the delivery of excellent teaching and learning. Both units exist to support the same outcomes, but the means in terms of the style and nature of the work are different. Another part of the academic secretary's office is the university counselling service, which sits in the student administration and support division. This is a welfare service, which is arguably reactive to student need. Mental health issues can and do impact upon many students and the provision of services to help students to deal with these issues is an important part of the "safety net" of welfare services which help to support students in the successful completion of their studies in the face of issues which could otherwise undermine that fundamental objective. Counselling services in universities tend to operate on the basis of student self-referral and/or tutor referral and so, they are "reactive" in that sense. The term reactive is not used in a pejorative sense here. Rather, it is the case that some services, such as counselling are appropriately reactive to identified need and organised around individual referral.

Some universities, though not this one, bracket their careers services and counselling services together with some other services in generally welfare-oriented management units called “student services” or similar. In some of these, the needs-driven, individual referral ethos which is appropriate for the welfare services but arguably less appropriate for the careers service as a student development service, causes the careers service to be something of an outlier in the broader department. In some cases, the welfare orientation sits comfortably with the careers service and its leader and the service is structured around individual career “counselling” which helps to enable a commonality of operational management issues across the units within the student services entity. In this university however, the situation prior to the review was one in which the university had for some time, positioned the careers service as a proactive student development service alongside others with a similar orientation, but the service had actually operated along the reactive, individual referral lines, which might seem more appropriate for a welfare service. The service was either in the right institutional location but operating in the wrong way or it was operating in an appropriate way but incorrectly located. The former was the unequivocal conclusion of the review.

The post-review situation for the current HoCS presents an interesting and unusual set of circumstances in relation to the alignment of environment, values and resources (EVR). His outward-looking developmental orientation and credentials were exactly in line with the university’s expectations for the service and its leader and these were formally evaluated through a selection process. This outlook is very much in line with the dominant developmental, curriculum-linked ethos of the broader group to which the service belongs. The implementation of the university’s employability ambitions is being carried through via a curriculum review process for which the service group in general and its educational development service in particular are the natural homes of central support and coordination, with the careers and employability service fitting very neatly into this as the central consultancy service in relation to the specific employability and work placement aspects of curriculum review. The deliberate positioning of the careers and employability service within a “student development” grouping clearly sets up a situation in which a developmental, curriculum-linked operation would be expected to operate in a mode which is intended to support and inform the delivery of employability via the core educational experience; in a manner in which a completely extra-curricular student service, led by individual student demand, would not.

The HoCS takes a very positive view of this but sees challenges in leading a core professional workforce with a history of providing a relatively reactive, central service to individual students, which will now be required to emphasise the academic consultancy role in the context of SLAs.

*“We need to move some of them out of their comfort zone” (HoCS case 2)*

His own outlook as the leader is in line with university strategic intent and the institutional positioning of the professional service in the context of how strategy will be realised and who will deliver is very clear. From an institutional perspective, the necessary change in the professional service has been made and the delivery strategy is underway, which may serve to offset a sense of urgency for change. From the HoCS perspective, whilst self contained service developments such as the growth of involvement in work placements continues apace, the full transition from non-extended to extended service in relation to the institutional strategy and employability eco-system is a work in progress. A development which was just about to take place at the time of the study, was set to add further complexity, visibility and accountability to the HoCS role. He reported that he was about to assume managerial responsibility for the “Educational Opportunities” (widening participation and outreach) service operation in addition to the careers and employability service and that his job title would change to reflect this. It was far too early to be clear about the detail of how this might develop in terms of service to service integration, although it was clear that the HoCS own responsibilities were changing and expanding in a way in which he saw as much more overtly target-driven than his role hitherto and which strongly linked employability to widening participation.

*“Employability is target-light compared to the Access Agreement and many of those (Access Agreement) targets relate to employment outcomes.” (HoCS case 2)*

This is a new development and this means that its implementation could not be part of this study. However, it does suggest the recent development of a clearer, identity based strategy attempting to combine perceived accessibility (educated guesses about getting into this university) with employability (educated guesses about status/positional returns from attending this university) which will impact directly on the ways in which the employability offer is likely to be conceptualised, constructed, managed and measured, starting with the role of the manager now at the centre of

this effort. The perceived pace of change, judged to be “medium” at the outset may be accelerating in this particular case.

### **3.3: Case study 3**

#### **3.3.1 Background:**

This is a research-intensive university, performing well in league tables-typically top 25 in the UK, which also identifies itself as a “civic university” with clearly declared intentions to be a major player in and contributor to its region (in addition to the national and global aspirations normally associated with a university of this type). The positioning of the careers service is category 3 extended, consolidated. The perceived pace of change in organisational configuration relating to employability at the time of the study was low.

#### **3.3.2 The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy:**

##### **What is to be achieved?**

At the highest level of public strategy declaration in the university’s strategic mission document there are no overt references to employability to be found in the brief mission statement or in the handful of top-line institutional objectives, but the statement of principles and values in the same document includes a commitment to “educate for life” explaining that this concept means both providing education which will last a lifetime and providing knowledge and skills which are “relevant to life and the world around us.”

The mission document contains the “headlines” from the delivery strategies which flow from it, using these to illustrate the meaning of the higher level declarations and aspirations. The strategy to illustrate “educate for life” is the Learning and Teaching and Student Experience (LTSE) strategy (2009). This strategy overtly combines formal learning and teaching and the broader student experience and employability features strongly. In acknowledging external drivers, the LTSE strategy refers to “The national steer for higher education to become more ‘employer responsive’ through developing the higher level skills of the workforce and enhancing graduate employability.”



As mentioned earlier, this institution sees itself unequivocally as a major player in and contributor to, the life of its home region. Indeed the subtitle to the mission document title is “a world-class civic university.” An Engagement Strategy flows from this overarching aim. Interestingly and somewhat distinctively for a Russell group university, the Engagement Strategy is a whole-institution strategy, with executive level (PVC) ownership, which is distinct from the university’s Research and Innovation strategy which operates at the same level. In many similar institutions, the aims and objectives related to regional engagement and impact are to be found in research and innovation or “knowledge-transfer” strategies. This element of distinctiveness is emphasised in the Engagement Strategy itself, where it is noted that “only half of the (mission) group have formal mission statements” in this area. The two other universities with similar declarations of intent are in Scotland and Northern Ireland, effectively suggesting that this university is the most committed of its type, to regional engagement in England. The Engagement Strategy contains fundamental statements of values in relation to how the university views the development and deployment of graduate talent. This is translated directly into a specific KPI (see below).

In order to understand the “employability” aims of university B, it is critically important to take into account both the notion of educating for life and the LTSE strategy which flows from that and the centrality of the notion of being a civic university and the ensuing Engagement Strategy.

### **3.3.3 Competitive strategy:**

#### **What is to be achieved in positional competition with other universities?**

In this case, one of the ultimate measures of success in employability terms is a comparative measure. The PVC (L&T) shared the key performance indicators (KPI) in her area within which the key employability measure is to be in the Top15 in the Times Good University Guide. The basis of the ranking is the percentage of (home, first degree) graduates entering graduate level destinations at six months after graduation as reported via the DLHE survey (the graduate prospects score). On the face of it, this is a relatively ambitious target set as it is, at ten places above the university’s overall ranking in the same league table. The target does not appear to be unrealistic. The target was missed by five places in 2008, exceeded in 2009 and achieved again in 2010. The university identifies fourteen comparator universities and only four of these are in the top 15 on the graduate employment measure. In

terms of strategic issue awareness, this is not an area in which there appears to be “something amiss.” Instead, this is an area in which the university sets out to do well in national terms and achieves its goals.

The other measure, which is a particular feature of this university in relation to its research-intensive peer group is the regional engagement measure relating to the utilisation of graduate talent in the region, which flows from the Engagement Strategy. The element of this strategy which relates directly to employability falls under a strategic objective to “attract top talent to settle in the region.” This objective is measured against several KPIs, one of which is the “percentage of new graduates entering employment or further study in the region.” As with the more commonplace league table measure mentioned above, this KPI is based on DLHE data.

As an element of competitive strategy, this civic/regional dimension appears to be about positioning and distinctiveness rather than direct like for like comparison on a common measure as in the case of the employment league tables. Another striking feature arising from the civic university identity, positioning and strategy is a declared position in relation to the regional labour market demand side of the knowledge economy. Much of the discourse, which seems to be driving public policy on higher education (even in the face of high levels of unemployment) seems to assume the continuing development of the demand (for highly educated labour) side of the knowledge economy as a requirement for the maintenance of the supply side in the form of the continuation of the output of graduates at current levels (Browne 2010). This university seems to accept a role in helping to create that demand, through its contribution to regional economic development. In relation to “attracting top talent” the engagement strategy suggests that the key to this is “the availability of satisfying career paths” and affirms that the university will make its contribution to bringing this about, alongside other key regional players.

As mentioned earlier, the LTSE strategy refers to “education for life” as one of two underpinning principles (the other is parity of esteem for Learning and Teaching with Research) and offers the following explanation of this principle:

*“By education for life we mean providing all students with knowledge and skills that will last a lifetime, and providing knowledge relevant and useful to life and the world around them”*

The strategy stresses the importance of the involvement of students as partners. Whilst the strategy acknowledged the external policy driver around graduate employability, there is no hint here of the essentially transactional nature of the relationship between university and student, which is implied in much of the public policy discourse, although it should be noted that the strategy was drafted more than a year before the Browne report.

The strategy makes it clear that this university seeks to deliver a student experience which is fully rounded, enjoyable and *formative* (my emphasis). A key enabler described in the strategy is the Graduate Skills Framework, which is being used to “identify and articulate the skills and competencies students develop as part of the (university) experience” and to “enhance curricular and extra-curricular opportunities for the development of graduate skills.” The combined L&T and student experience strategy encompasses the curricular and the co-curricular and makes a link between the provision of opportunities for personal and skills development and future employability. This is encapsulated in the aim to

*“..deliver curricular and extra-curricular provision, which ensures graduates are well equipped for further training, research and workforce needs.”* (LTSE strategy-case 3).

The aim is supplemented by an “employability statement” which was produced before there was a mandatory requirement for institutions to publish such statements. The employability statement is produced by the careers service, but it is the university’s employability statement. The statement pre-dated the introduction of the requirement for all universities to publish such a statement.

The strategy makes substantial reference to employer engagement. Whilst this includes the provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to employers, it also covers ways in which employers’ input can be gained in relation to the perceived quality and relevance of programmes and the quality of the university’s graduates. Employers were extensively consulted in the development of the graduate skills framework.

The strategy commits the university to creating opportunities for students’ personal and professional development, stating that it will:

*“Provide students with the opportunity to fulfil their potential and develop the attributes and skills that are necessary for learning, life and work in a global economy.” (LTSE strategy-case 3).*

The strategy then goes on to list a number of specific ways in which opportunities will be encouraged and developed and the ways in which the whole university community will provide support to students in accessing and making the most of the opportunities.

#### **3.3.4: Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the careers service (HoCS):**

Whilst the LTSE strategy describes clear KPIs , the wording of the strategy is quite non-specific in terms of “who does what” implying that the implementation of the strategy is a shared responsibility for the university community of academic units and professional services. However, interviews with both the PVC L&T (the strategy owner) and the director of the careers service made it clear that in this case, the careers service seems to be positioned at the heart of the employability elements of the LTSE strategy.

The PVC outlined her view of the role of the careers service (in relation to the strategy, as distinct from delivering its core operational services)

*“I see it (the role of the careers service) as an outward-facing, horizon-scanning strategic role, understanding and shaping what employers think about the university and its graduates”- (PVC LTSE case 3).*

It should be noted that the PVC was very clear about the diversity of the university’s subject mix in terms of relative degrees of overt vocational orientation, meaning that a one size fits all approach would be neither desirable nor successful. Within this clear context, her expectation is that the service has a key role in working with academic colleagues on the employability agenda and in the development and delivery of career development modules within formal curricula.

This strategic context is one in which it appears unsurprising that the careers service should be the author of the university’s employability statement. Most of the overtly employability-related sections of the strategy represent areas in which the careers

service would be the deliverer or in which the broader community effort would be led or coordinated by the careers service. There are sections of the strategy which read like careers service strategic objectives. The careers service director confirmed that there is indeed overlap between objectives which are stated for the university as a whole in the LTSE strategy and for the service specifically in its own plans.

*“Yes, we wrote much of it (the employability content of the delivery strategy) and the university expects that, so there’s bound to be some overlap.” - (HoCS case 3).*

The PVC outlined the duality of accountability for the careers service director. Formal line management lies with the Registrar, who is the executive leader of all the professional services, of which the careers service is one. The careers service director is accountable to the Registrar for the successful operation of the professional service which he leads. At the same time, the careers service director has “dotted line” accountability to the PVC for the successful execution of his broader influencing, leading and coordinating roles in terms of helping the university community at large to deliver against the employability and related objectives of the STSE strategy.

*“We expect (name of HoCS) to provide us with that advice.” - (PVC LTSE case 3).*

The PVC commented that her expectation would be that the duality of accountability would extend to the first destinations-based KPI concerned with being in the national top 15 in the Times league table. The leaders of the academic units have accountability for the relevant KPIs in the group labelled “student satisfaction and student experience” (which includes the destinations KPI and others for overall student satisfaction, as measured by the National Student Satisfaction Survey (NSS) and the proportion of the student body which is postgraduate), whilst the careers service director was perceived as having accountability to the Registrar for delivering his direct service contribution to the destinations KPI and to the PVC for the cross-institutional influencing/consulting/curriculum development role as an enabler for the academic units in making their contribution to the same KPI.

The duality of accountability becomes more of a multiplicity, when taking into account the civic university/regional development dimension of the university’s mission, as embodied in the engagement strategy. As explained earlier, the university KPI based on the percentage of graduates going into graduate level

employment, relative to peers/competitors is linked primarily to the LTSE strategy, with the PVC L&T as the strategy owner. However, the university KPI based on the percentage of graduates entering graduate employment or further study *in the region* is a published metric for the Engagement Strategy with the PVC Engagement as the strategy owner. On this basis alone it is no surprise to see that the careers service director is one of a very small minority of non-academic members of the “Engagement Strategy Development Group” convened to oversee the implementation of the strategy.

The extent to which the careers service and its director are key players in the external-facing engagement strategy and related activity becomes clearer still from a closer examination of the activities forming the inputs to the strategy. The engagement strategy includes significant emphasis on the impact created by the university’s students and graduates, particularly as graduate recruits, placement students and interns with local organisations of all kinds and as volunteers engaging in projects of direct benefit to regional communities. The engagement strategy strongly promotes career development modules as frameworks within which voluntary projects can be best organised and their benefits to the community and to students, most readily realised. The same externally facing elements of the student experience, which are deemed by the Engagement strategy to generate valuable *outputs* to the region, are seen as employability and personal development *inputs* to the student experience in the LTSE strategy, albeit with global as well as regional scope. The career development modules are delivered by the careers service. Whilst there are numerous co-curricular providers of personal development opportunities (not least the student union) the opportunities are brought together under a single brand with an associated website and this is also managed by the careers service.

The LTSE strategy makes reference to the provision of opportunities for students to engage in enterprise and entrepreneurship, including “training, mentoring and advice from entrepreneurs to support development of business and commercial acumen.” Again, there is an element of LTSE input in terms of skills development and start-up support and Engagement output in terms of graduate business start-ups in the region. Business start-up support for students and graduates, where it is provided on campus, is most frequently located in business schools or knowledge transfer offices. Only a small number of universities have chosen to base this service within their careers services and this university is one of them. Where this is

the case, there tends to be a very clear rationale based on positioning business start up as a legitimate career option alongside all others. Leeds (Gilworth 2011), Birmingham and the LSE are also prominent proponents of this model. The employability statement attached to the LTSE strategy in this case study provides a particularly clear explanation of employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship, with the second and third of these clearly positioned as sub-sets of the first.

A particular section of the LTSE strategy provides a concise summary of the university's approach to supporting employability. The section is headed "enabling students to access support for and experience of, work and enterprise to help them meet their needs and shape their futures." As well as rehearsing the other inputs described so far in relation to work experience, enterprise and personal development, this section also highlights the university's intentions in relation to information, advice and guidance.

*"The university's academic units and professional support services enable students to access the information, advice and guidance and experiences they need for their personal and professional career development in research in enterprise and entrepreneurship, in employment, including well-founded diverse careers advice and guidance which is truly international; in its scope."* (LTSE strategy –case 3).

Whether positioned as inputs to the student experience or outputs to the region (and beyond), there is a set of "ingredients" for employability represented across the LTSE and Engagement strategies. These appear to be employer engagement (both as gatekeepers of opportunities and as shapers of the educational offer, through the university's graduate skills framework), work experience, career development learning (the career development modules), enterprise and entrepreneurship, personal development (particularly through co-curricular activities) and careers advice and guidance.

Analysis of the two university strategies and the careers service's offer and structure in the light of interviews with the PVC and the careers service director indicate strongly that the service is positioned as a direct deliverer and as the institutional coordinator, supporter and adviser to others in the pursuit of all of the employability activities listed above, which generate input benefits to internal stakeholders and output benefits to external stakeholders, often simultaneously.

The extent to which this is the case is usefully illustrated by the senior management (strategy team) structure of the careers service. The team is made up of the director, together with four assistant directors. The management portfolios of the assistant directors are: service support, information advice and guidance, entrepreneurial development and curriculum. The service support portfolio includes the direct employer engagement activity, which handles and promotes opportunities including those in the region and brings employers on to the campus and the DLHE operation which provides the data upon which the relevant institutional KPIs are based (as well as the essential infrastructure and enablers which allow the service to function as a unit). The information advice and guidance (IAG) portfolio includes the provision of the professional careers IAG services referred to in the LTSE strategy and the management of the cross campus brand for co-curricular personal development activities, many of which have community impact in relation to the Engagement strategy. As the name suggests, the entrepreneurial development portfolio covers the enterprise and business start-up related services referred to in the LTSE and Engagement strategies. The post-holder was also responsible for leading the project which created the university's graduate skills framework, whilst on secondment from the service. The main component of the curriculum portfolio is the management of the career development modules, which are very clearly LTSE inputs and Engagement outputs. The service is the home of the university's central work placement/work experience offerings and management responsibility for these is split between the assistant director (service support) whose staff run the business-facing programmes, and the assistant director (curriculum) whose curriculum development team runs those programmes located in schools and community settings.

In summary, this university identifies numerous employability inputs and related outputs in its LTSE and Engagement strategies and the careers service appears to be a key player in all of them. As a result, the role of the service and its director are multi-faceted. The director is accountable in several directions at once in his dual role as professional service leader and strategic adviser. The service itself is necessarily comprehensive, with a management structure which reflects the breadth of the offer.

The range of key central services, which help to deliver against the university's employability aims and objectives are typically spread across various units in other institutions, (entrepreneurship and placements in schools might be good examples)



but in this case, they are all brought together into a single unit in the form of a comprehensive careers service.

The university's enterprise centre and students into schools operation were merged into the careers service in 2006. The process was overseen by the careers service director and the leaders of the two merged operations are now members of the careers service's strategy team. Mergers almost inevitably produce issues and challenges in relation to the alignment of environment, values and resources (EVR) and the careers service director was clear that work had to be done in these areas to bring about the shared values and clarity of purpose which exist now. The HoCs felt strongly that this change process had brought the service to a position of comprehensiveness and critical mass which enable it to play such a key role in the university's approach to employability.

The HoCS was also clear that success in relation to employability had been directly linked to positional competition for some time, certainly pre-dating recent moves to generate more "consumer information" through employability statements and the KIS.

*"It's been about league tables ever since I came in." (HoCS case 3). The HoCS was appointed in 2003.*

The evidence suggests that there is a strong and successful alignment between the university's employability aims and objectives and the configuration of its offer and resources, built around the professional careers service. DLHE based employability measures make a net positive contribution to overall league table success and niche identity based regional graduate employment outcomes make a net positive contribution to overall employability success.

*"Our regional figures are very strong..actually better for graduate level than our national figures." (HoCS case 3).*

There is a strong sense of a university which, having paid attention to and achieved success in employability in relation to pre-existing positional competition, sees itself as well positioned in relation to the sharpened positional competition now being introduced into the market. Of course, this refers to the university's own efforts, not to the ways in which the current strong relative position (given the "remorseless logic

of zero sum”) might be affected by the deliberate actions of direct competitors, some of which become evident in other cases in this study.

### **3.4: Case study 4.**

#### **3.4.1: Background:**

University C is a high-performing, high status university. The university is associated with the expansion of universities on out of town campuses in the 1960s following the Robbins report. This university is not one of the group which were originally Colleges of Advanced Technology (CAT) and therefore does not have the applied/vocational heritage shared by those universities. Of the universities in this study, this is the one most likely to benefit from Marginson's "educated guesses" based on perceived status alone. The positioning of the careers service was category 2: moving from non-extended to extended at the time of the initial contact for this study. The perceived pace of change in organisational configuration relating to employability was very high. The university was moving along the continuum at such a pace that it was moving through to extended rapidly at the time of the study with clear intent to move rapidly to an integrated position.

References to "colleges" in this case relate to the internal organisation of the university, which was one of a number in the UK choosing to re-structure its academic units from a relatively large number of Schools into fewer, larger management entities known as Colleges. This structure was already in place at the time of the study, but some of the documentary evidence referred to, uses the term "schools."

#### **3.4.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy:**

##### **What is to be achieved?**

In its high level visions as declared on its website the university defines its “Key Characteristics.” One of these is “The (name of university) graduate-committed, involved and in demand.” The university’s strategic plan has a clear commitment to employability:

*“We will strengthen our students’ prospects for graduate employment by equipping them with the skills and personal qualities necessary to succeed in a global economy”.* (Strategic plan-case 4)

The section on delivering the strategy then goes on to explicitly include the graduate prospects figure of percentage into graduate-level destinations at six months as one of the ten key performance indicators for the university. The university’s Education Strategy (2010-2015) relates to the strategic plan. The dates here are significant in relation to institutional action on employability in that the education strategy was put together in the light of the 2008/09 recession and a review of the university’s performance in the employability league tables (in comparison with its performance on most other measures). There is a real sense of the strategy on employability being driven entirely by positional competition. This is discussed in greater detail in the “competitive strategy” section below.

### **3.4.3: Competitive strategy:**

#### **What is to be achieved in positional competition with other universities?**

This is a case in which institutional competitive strategy in the specific area of employability has been considered, framed and is being pursued in response to strategic analysis which concluded that “something was amiss” (Johnson and Scholes 1993), or at the very least that change was a necessary condition of future success. The timing of the publication of the key institutional delivery strategy, namely the Education Strategy 2010-2015 is crucial to understanding the context. This strategy was considered and written in the immediate aftermath of the 2008/09 recession and its impact on graduate employment. The Browne review had already been commissioned and the prospect of significant fee increases or possible de-regulation was high on the agenda of (the senior managers of) English universities. At the same time, it had become clear that this university’s position in employability league tables was out of line with its very strong performance on other key measures and that unless action was taken to “Transform our students’ prospects for graduate employment and further study” (one of the five strategic goals in the education strategy), this would remain a significant barrier to the overall strategic aim of becoming a university consistently ranked in the national top ten.

The university published detailed analyses of its institutional aspirations on the planning section of its website. A key section within this is entitled “Top Ten by

2012." Under this heading, the university is very clear about its chosen "competitor group" and a set of "super KPIs" relating to "ten key performance areas." which includes "undergraduate (i.e. first degree graduate) graduate level employment" explained and expressed in terms of the percentage of graduate level destinations metrics used by the league tables and fed by the DLHE exercise. It is clear that of the ten key performance areas, the university perceives that there is something amiss in two of them. These are staff/student ratios (SSR) and the graduate employment measure. Internal analysis of the Times Good University Guide (GUG) for example shows an overall ranking of 12th. A clutch of indicators such as completion (4th), student satisfaction (5th), good honours (proportion of first and upper seconds awarded) (8th), research quality (10th), entry standards (17th) and service and facilities spend (22nd) are all seen as consistent with the intended trajectory, whereas it is not difficult to see why SSR (72nd) and "graduate prospects" (55th) are seen as problematic.

It follows from the analysis of the ten key performance areas that the Education Strategy makes "transforming" students' prospects for graduate employment one of its five strategic goals. In terms of what is to be achieved, the strategy sets a KPI for league table performance as "median top ten." This does not mean that the university aims to be above the median score of the top ten universities in the overall employment league table. Instead, university C uses "top ten" in the context of its "top ten by 2012" aspirations to refer to its standing within a comparison group of high performing institutions (known by this university as the "top ten group") against which it is perceived that performance at or above the mid- point in that group on all key measures would be likely to produce an overall top ten ranking. To be clear, there are more than ten institutions in the "top ten" comparison group. There are in fact, thirteen, including the university itself. According to its own analysis as it embarked on its strategy to transform employability, this university was twelfth of the thirteen on the graduate employment measure in the Sunday Times league table and thirteenth of thirteen in the Times rankings. The scale of the required improvement was significant and very specific action was proposed in the strategy.

**3.4.4: How will the strategic aims be realised? Who delivers? The role and position of the university careers service and the Head of the Careers Service (HoCS): (The "how" and the "who" sections are combined in this case because the reconfiguration of resources and leadership were key components of the delivery strategy).**

The specific emphasis on employability in the education strategy carries particular challenges and opportunities for the university's careers service and its leadership. Indeed, significant changes to the careers service and its leadership are components of the competitive strategy designed to address the perceived strategic challenges around employability. The strategy includes a commitment to "Conduct a comprehensive review of employability skills and employment support services, and make a high level appointment to take forward the employability agenda" The review and appointment were carried through and the appointment was made in 2010. The post holder was interviewed for this case study. In essence, the post-holder's task is summed up in the following commitments in the education strategy:

*"Develop a Careers and Employment Service that is a UK leader and that will work seamlessly with Schools" and "enhance the strategic leadership of employment initiatives."* (education strategy-case 4).

Analysis of the job description for the role and the interview with the post-holder made it clear that the new "high level appointment" was at a higher level in the university structure than the existing Head of Careers Service (HoCS) post. The operational HoCS post remains in the structure and reports to the new post. The service has now been renamed "Employability and Graduate Development" with the higher level post designated director of employability and graduate development and the former HoCS designated head of employability and graduate development. The titles and line management relationship might suggest that the new post is a sort of "super HoCS" leading the central professional service from a more senior position. However, the interview with the director made it clear that he sees his task as being entirely in line with the ambition set out in the education strategy. His post is a university corporate appointment to "take forward the employability agenda" for the university as a whole as distinct from being solely the leader of a central professional service. However, for the purposes of this study, the new, more senior staff member was the key post-holder to be interviewed and for the sake of

consistency with the other case studies and other chapters, the new post holder will be referred to as the HoCS.

When the education strategy describes the development of a careers and employment service “which is a UK leader and works seamlessly with Schools” this is not simply a statement of intent in relation to stepping up the activity and profile of the central service. The commitment to developing a service which “works seamlessly with Schools” refers to the creation of an overall employability effort, which spans all academic units (the Schools) and the central service into a cohesive whole, with the new director as the high level appointment described in the strategy charged with the responsibility of coordinating and steering the whole effort from “the centre.” At the same time, the education strategy makes a university commitment to “empower” the academic leaders of the learning and teaching and student experience agenda in the Schools (directors of education) to take responsibility for enhancing the employability of all their students and support them in developing School based activities and programmes.

As the name change for the careers service implies, one of the tasks which was high on the agenda of the new director (HoCS) was the re-positioning and re-branding of the central careers service. In this regard the language of the education strategy seems to imply that the service should be re-positioned nationally within its peer group as well institutionally. If the university felt that it needs to create a careers and employability service which is a UK and leader and works seamlessly with schools; a probable implication is that the existing careers service was not previously positioned in this way. This was not necessarily an overt criticism of what has gone before, but it was a declaration that change was an essential condition for institutional success in the area of employability.

The new director was recruited externally from a university which is in the “top ten” comparison group, where, as the HoCS, he played a leading role in turning around that university’s performance on the graduate employment league table measure, in very similar circumstances to those being addressed by this university. The director outlined the situation at his previous institution where graduate employment was seen as a relative weakness, with a detrimental impact on overall university performance and was therefore seen as an urgent issue to be addressed. In terms of competitive strategy “something was amiss” and the ways in which the senior

management of the institution set out to address this placed the university's careers service and its leader (the HoCS) at the centre of delivering the solution.

In his new institution and post, there is a clear expectation that the HoCS role will sit at the head of the central service *and* at the hub of a faculty network structure, directing both centrally based staff and resources and those based in academic faculties, with a mixture of line management accountability. In his new post, the director was acutely aware of the fact that he had been brought to the university as a change agent, with the brief to develop the central careers service into a "UK leader which works seamlessly with schools" and to develop university's collective employability effort as a network organisation in which he will have direct line management authority over the central element (the re-invented careers service) on the one hand and a senior coordinating role, without line management authority, in relation to the distributed, academic unit-based elements on the other. The new director was faced with the twin tasks of effectively re-inventing the central professional service and driving implementation through the academic SBUs at the same time. He was specifically tasked with moving the professional service from historically, non-extended student service to sector-leading extended service and rapidly integrating this with the efforts based in the academic SBUs to create an integrated whole-institution employability organisation.

At the time of the study, the HoCS was in the early stages of implementing some of the changes that he had been brought in to make, but felt that the path ahead in relation to the implementation of the strategy was made very clear as a result of very strong executive determination to "fix" the "problem" of employability. He felt that the steer came directly from the top in this university which had a very "hands on" Vice Chancellor/chief executive with a highly directive style in relation to directing efforts overtly towards the delivery of strategic objectives including the improvement of employability performance. The HoCS perceived that this drive from the top sharpened his own accountability

*"I'm pretty clear about the price of failure"* (HoCS case 4)

Executive determination also provided very clear direction to the academic SBUs in relation to their responsibilities to deliver and to support the HoCS in his mission. The most striking illustration was the provision of financial bonuses to holders of learning and teaching leadership roles in the academic SBUs related directly to the

achievement of strategy driven KPIs including those related to employability. The HoCS explained that the management drive in the colleges themselves comes from the allocation of responsibility, for college performance against employability KPIs to the associate deans for education in each college. This responsibility is reinforced by a financial incentive linked to various KPIs including DLHE-based measures of employability success. (This particular feature was not present in any of the other institutions in the study, nor any others known to the author). The associate deans in turn allocate responsibility as “careers and employability reps” to members of academic staff, in line with the disciplines represented within the college. Each college also has a professional service structure under a college manager and there are college employability officers within that organisation. The academic “reps”, the college-based employability officers and the central professional service-based career consultants assigned to work with specific colleges form the tripartite structure charged with ensuring that the corporate employability goals are achieved at college level. The HoCS has the central accountability for ensuring collectively delivery against the corporate employability goals, through the tri-partite college structure, with its various line management arrangements, together with the operation of the central service.

The senior leadership of the institution were creating the conditions for the new director to shape the implementation of the strategy. In this way, the "who" of the new senior post, the reinvented service and the staff concerned with employability in the academic SBUs and the "how" of strategy realisation were being developed simultaneously, rather than the former flowing sequentially from the latter.

The HoCs explained the way in which he was pursuing a line of service level agreement (SLA)-based mutual expectations between the professional service and the academic SBUs with a substantial degree of centralised prescription, borne of executive determination to “fix” the employability “problem.” A good illustration of this is the following communication from Employability and Graduate Development (the professional service) to the academic community in the colleges (the academic SBUs). The opening paragraph is reproduced in full here, as it is such a good illustration of the corporate drive in this institution. The emboldened (my emphasis) sentence could be seen as an especially strong example.

*“As an institution we must ensure that all graduates are equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and vocabulary for today’s job market so that they are competitive*



*in whatever field they choose to enter and students with these employability skills and mindsets tend to be more committed academically. **(The university) has highly prioritised employability as a key Education Strategy target, and we are aiming to increase our graduate destination scores (those in graduate-level work/ study, six months after graduation) to above our Top-10 comparator group median in the shortest time possible.** Indeed, the University has invested heavily in staffing, resource, capital projects and implemented systems to ensure the whole University is supporting the development of the agenda. Academics and colleges clearly have an essential role to play as well.”* (from “How we can help you and your college”-communication from the professional service to the academic SBUs-case 4).

In offering to support the academic SBUs and to work in partnership with the re-invented professional service, the HoCS is unequivocally communicating the idea of working together in pursuit of a clear corporate imperative (as distinct from an exclusive focus on doing good things for students).

The same communication goes on to explain that the service has developed a new service level agreement and workload model to “clearly articulate what you can expect from us” and “what we need from you to succeed in making an impact upon our students” along with “*compulsory*” (my emphasis) 3-2-1 workshops, aimed at every discipline at every level, so that students get key messages about career planning at the right time.” There is an expectation that the academic SBUs and the professional service will work together to create local employability plans or programmes in pursuit of corporate objectives and KPIs derived from them. This includes the provision of a timeline which illustrates what students should understand at each level (akin to learning outcomes). The professional service informs its academic partners that it “will introduce mechanisms, in consultation with the College, to ascertain whether these aims have been achieved.”

The overt “Top Ten” comparator context for these messages and initiatives indicates how strongly the configuration of the employability effort is linked to positional competition. There is an unequivocal drive to ensure that in future, employability makes a positive contribution to reinforcing (rather than apparently contradicting) educated guesses about likely positional returns from this university, based on traditional assumptions about status.

### **3.5: Case study 5:**

#### **3.5.1: Background:**

This is a large, comprehensive, research intensive “red brick” university. At the time of the study, the university had made a public commitment to developing its employability effort by advertising numerous posts as a result of a major investment in this area. In professional circles, this investment had attracted much interest, not only because of its scale but also because it was being used to develop a whole institution employability entity, spanning central service and academic SBUs. The positioning of the careers service was category 4: moving from extended to integrated. The perceived pace of change in organisational configuration relating to employability was high. Like the university in case study 4, this institution had reorganised its academic SBUs into fewer, larger Colleges.

#### **3.5.2: The incorporation of employability into corporate strategy:**

##### **What is to be achieved?**

The university sets out its overarching goals in a high-level strategy document called “shaping our future.” The document declares five strategic goals as follows: “Enhance our research power, Provide our students with a distinctive, high quality experience, Sustain our financial strength and use it purposefully, Enhance our performance and status as an 'engaged university'. Be the destination of choice amongst our peers.”

The timing of the publication of this strategy document was such that it was possible for this university to factor the new fees situation into the overall resource environment and to make references to the choices which need to be made. In contrast to many institutional strategies which set out long lists of enhancements without any real sense of how these might be financed in what might reasonably be assumed to be a “zero sum” financial environment, this strategy unequivocally recognises the situation:

*“We must continue to disinvest from those activities which do not support our strategic goals.”* (Strategic plan-case 5)

This creation of financial space to facilitate investment in areas which are seen to directly support strategic goals is significant in relation to the development of the careers service and the related employability mechanisms as outlined below.

The description of what is to be achieved in relation to employability is couched in terms of enhancing the quality of the offer to the student, as distinct from explicitly declaring aspirations about standing in relation to other universities. It also tends to be couched more in terms of student skills development than in direct relation to standing with graduate employers. Even where employer engagement is specifically mentioned, the context is that of better understanding “of global employment markets and thereby better preparing our graduates for their chosen careers.”

In general terms, the high level strategic vision is typically light on details of the “how” as might be expected. The publically available version of the learning and teaching strategy which in many other examples would give more detail of the ways in which strategic goals might be achieved does not operate at this level, simply stating that the university will “Enhance student employability through curriculum development, employer engagement and voluntary activity.” A combination of this style of presentation in publically available documents and the timing of this research meant that in this particular case study, the balance of information to be gathered about this university’s approach to employability is skewed more strongly to that which was gathered from interviewing the HoCS.

At the time of this enquiry, University E had very recently made a striking statement of intent in relation to employability by making a major recurring investment in the development of an employability infrastructure based on its careers service. The HoCS who was leading this development was very open and helpful in sharing the detail of this development, including sight of documents which aided verification, but the development is perhaps too new to feature in publically available documents and the key organisational features which are of direct relevance to this study may reasonably be seen as being of less interest to the public. As will be seen later, it is unquestionably the case that there is a strategy to deliver employability, but there is not a publically declared “employability strategy” as such.

### **3.5.3: Competitive strategy: What is to be achieved in positional competition with other universities?**

As outlined above, issues of standing (league tables) on employability measures in relation to other universities are not directly alluded to in the high level vision document. However, the document is highly aspirational in terms of the standing of the university as a whole and in that sense the strategic goals are set out as contributing factors to that broader aspiration in the context of positional competition as follows:

*“Success in all of these goals will require a step change in our performance and this will be reflected by a rise in our position in the national and global league tables.”*

*“We aim to be the destination of choice amongst our peers.”* (strategic plan-case 5)

In this context, positional status competition can be seen as the overarching drive to which the more specific strategic commitments contribute. The goal of providing students with a distinctive, high quality experience is a specific and crucially important area. This in turn, contains the references to employability describing its actions as “curriculum innovation” and “enhancement of the student experience, including student support facilities and services and employability” with key performance targets (KPTs) described as “A weighted scorecard of measures including intake quality, the National Student Survey, employability and degree classifications.”

From reading the document alone, it would be reasonable to conclude that the DLHE-based performance measures of employment outcomes and the translation of these into league table positions are bound to contribute to the “weighted scorecard of measures” at the strategic level and to the internal measurement of the success of employability interventions. The HoCS confirmed that the goals relating to the significant investment in and development of, the central service and a university-wide employability structure include improvement in DLHE-based measures which will in turn lead to improved league table standing. The overarching influence of positional competition is clear from both the documents and the view of the HoCS. It should be noted that in recent years the performance of this university on the “graduate prospects” (percentage into graduate level destinations at six months) measure has tended to place it in the lower third of its high-status mission group. In

terms of strategic issue awareness, employability is both important as a declared feature of the university's offer and identity as a university of the standing to which it aspires and "an issue" in that performance will need to be improved if aspirations are to be met. This is one of the areas of performance in which a "step change" is required.

There is no publically-declared "employability strategy" as such. Instead, there are some high-level goals relating to employability and a clear internal commitment to delivering these through the creation and operation of the new employability entity. As the new entity had only just been created as this account was written, it is far too early to evaluate the impact on the delivery of the university's employability goals. However, it is clear from conversation with the HoCS that the significant investment is accompanied by high-level expectations of strong performance on the DLHE-based league table measure of percentage of UK first degree graduates into graduate level destinations at six months beyond graduation. The intention is for the university to be in the top seven in the Russell Group on this measure, thereby moving from the lower third to the edge of upper third of that group of twenty in which the top six places tend to be taken by institutions from the "golden triangle" of Oxbridge and London institutions. The top six tend to have historical, cultural political and other advantages which are difficult if not impossible for even the remainder of the Russell Group to reproduce. In this sense, although seventh in a particular mission group may not sound like a lofty ambition, it means "the best of the rest" and that is quite an ambitious target, seeking to place this university just behind a group of universities in which the influence of Marginson's "educated guesses" is at its strongest.

#### **3.5.4: The role and position of the university careers service and the head of the careers service (HoCS).**

The current HoCS was a new, external appointment in June 2007, succeeding the previous director who was in post for many years. Prior to this change, the service was known as being a relatively reactive student service focussing primarily on one to one careers guidance with very limited academic engagement. By Russell Group standards, the service was quite small and the salary grades of its professional advisory staff were relatively low. At the time of writing, the situation is very different. In 2011, the university made a major investment, the scale of which attracted much attention within the profession, to create a whole-university employability entity. The

new organisation was initially called “Student Employability” and is based on the existing careers service and led by the careers service director (the HoCS), re-titled director of student employability. From the outside, this looks like revolutionary change, but the director’s account of the organisational journey from 2007 to 2011 suggests a strong element of evolution.

In many ways, the situation at the point at which the HoCS joined the university was very similar to that in case 2. Arguably the service in case 5 did not have the same potentially advantageous structural positioning, but as the HoCS explained a critical change in the internal environment had occurred prior to her appointment, which created the impetus for change. In 2005, the university restructured and as part of that process created a Division of Student Life. The broad remit of this division was along “student services” lines but with a more overt “development” mission sitting alongside the perhaps more traditional “welfare” mission with the careers service firmly placed in the former category. The HoCs feels strongly that this change in the internal environment created the conditions for the careers service to become an extended careers service taking on additional responsibilities for skills development and enterprise.

In terms of drivers for change, this university has elements of those present in the other “pre-92” universities in this study. As in case study 2, there was a sense of a new leader coming in whose style and approach was seen to fit with the kind of extended careers service that the university (certainly as represented by the Director of Student Life) wanted. The current HoCs felt that she was seen as a good fit because she had been leading the sort of outward-looking, academically networked approaches, which characterise the extended careers service model on a smaller scale at another (smaller pre ’92) institution. The Director of Student Life who recruited the HoCS had herself, come from a careers service background, having led and developed an extended careers service at a prominent Russell Group university to acclaim from within the sector. It is perhaps unsurprising that this senior post holder wished to see a similar development at this university. Unlike case study 2, there was not a service review to force the issue. Instead, there was a naturally occurring opportunity around the retirement of the previous director of the careers service, with the institutional intention for the direction of travel for the service steering the nature of the appointment of a new careers service leader.

A similarity with case 3 lies in the broadening of the remit to incorporate skills development and enterprise. This has echoes of the situation in case 3 where existing curriculum development and enterprise units were merged into the careers service. In both cases, this resulted in the acquisition of more staff and a broader remit and in both cases brought with it the management challenge of bringing the people and services together into a cohesive whole, which would hopefully be greater than the sum of the parts. However, the nature of the challenge was different in terms of the alignment of environment, values and resources (EVR) because the case 3 example was one of a merger of well established units into (rather than with) the careers service, whereas the broadening of the remit of the service in university E was just that, with the new resources and responsibilities added into those of the careers service at the point at which the university embarked on the provision of the services in question. The HoCS described this expansion (an unequivocal move to an extended careers service) as an important staging post on the way to the major development of 2011. Indeed her feeling was that this was the pivotal change, which put the service in a strong position to help to shape the university's strategic response to the increased importance of employability in the light of the external drivers of the Browne review and subsequent government policy and funding decisions, combined with internal drivers arising from the arrival of a new Vice Chancellor in 2009 and the restructuring of the university's academic SBUs, which followed shortly afterwards.

The university structured its academic units into five "colleges." These are academic SBUs, as distinct from the residential/pastoral/tutorial conception of colleges to be found in the collegiate universities such as Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. The college structure adopted at this university and at least one other Russell Group institution (Edinburgh) has organised the academic community into fewer, larger and therefore more politically powerful, units (colleges) than was the case under the preceding system of schools and/or faculties. The new colleges could perhaps be conceived of as "super-faculties." In the Edinburgh case, twenty two schools have been organised into just three colleges. In both this university and Edinburgh, the heads of the colleges are also Pro Vice Chancellors of the university. The college system gives the Heads of College/PVCs a formalised, dual role as heads of the academic SBUs and as full members of the vice chancellor's corporate executive, responsible for managing the institution as whole.

*"They (the college heads) are like mini-VCs."* (HoCS case 5)

The HoCS saw this configuration as critical in relation to the speed and decisiveness with which the university moved to make a very significant investment in the creation of a one-university employability organisation. Rather than taking a corporate idea (from the Vice Chancellor's executive group) to the "tax-payers" (the Deans of the academic SBUs) for agreement and funding through the "top-slicing" (deduction of central overheads from academic income streams), the Head of the Colleges/PVCs as the tax-payers were part of the executive group agreeing the ideas in principle from the outset. As employability had risen up the corporate agenda, it had become clear that this was a whole-university matter, not least as an issue for the academic SBUs in terms of their performance and attractiveness to students in the new fees environment (peer to peer positional competition at both the corporate and SBU levels). The HoCS saw that there was a clear recognition that investing in a whole-university solution based on a "hub and spoke" model, would allow for tailoring of provision at the level of the academic SBUs (and at internal levels below that), whilst having cost advantages over attempting to run some central operations and some college based operations in an uncoordinated fashion. The drive, led by the HoCS for a more academically-connected, extended careers service, which had begun three or four years earlier had captured the moment and fitted exactly with the strategic view, political will and financial resources of a senior executive group, which was particularly well placed to move rapidly because of its combination of corporate and academic SBU leadership.

The emerging structure at this university has some similarity to the rapidly developing model in case study 4 in that it encompasses both the central professional service and the academic SBUs. The university has created a pan-university "student employability" entity, based on the existing careers service as its central core, with both central and college based operations. The director of the careers service (the HoCS) has been re-designated "director of student employability" and is accountable for the leadership of the whole organisation. This is an "organic" development of the role of the existing careers service director and so, whilst the strategic positioning and seniority of the HoCS is very similar, the situation differs from the approach in case 4 of making an external appointment to a new post above the level of the head of the careers service, whilst retaining the latter within the new structure.

The HoCS was acutely aware that the scale of the investment had caused a stir in immediate professional circles because of its most obvious external manifestation.



This was the external advertising of a number of new posts (fourteen in all), which is a very large number in the relation to the previous size of the service and of university careers services in general. For example, the number of additional posts advertised at this university would equal the total number of staff in the service in case study 1. Whilst Russell Group careers services tend to be larger (often much larger) than those outside the Russell Group, the service at this university had historically been one of the smaller Russell Group services. However, the first-hand account from the HoCS makes some important points clear. This is not simply the expansion of a careers service. Instead, this is the conscious creation of a new whole-university employability organisation, spanning the “centre” and the academic SBUs. This moves the service from extended to integrated, rather than extended to super-extended but still separate from the academic SBUs. Neither is this a sudden revolution in 2011. The HoCS traces an evolutionary pattern, which precedes her own appointment, going back to the appointment of the then director of student life in 2005 and moving through the arrival of the HoCS and the conversion of the service into an extended careers service which helped to lay the foundations for the direction of travel which came together with strategic intent at the most senior levels to create the new employability entity.

It may seem obvious to suggest that the development of the new structure was necessarily at an advanced stage, by the time that new posts had been agreed and advertised. Nonetheless, the account from the HoCS included a description of a long term change management and staff development process, reinforcing the impression that the development of the new entity was far from an overnight occurrence. The key development has been the creation of the posts of “Employability Consultants” to lead the work of the student employability effort in each of the five colleges. The notion of a professional member of staff coordinating a group of colleagues to deliver a range of employability services, tailored to the needs of specific academic SBUs and largely delivered in situ is not in itself unique. For example, “Faculty lead career consultants” have been in place at the University of Leeds for several years. A unique feature of the organisation in this case, however is that the Employability Consultants have direct line management responsibility for the small employability teams in each of the colleges. The HoCS describes this as another aspect of the evolutionary journey undertaken by her organisation. This particular aspect is key to external understanding of the change over time from relatively introverted, individual guidance, student-service style careers organisation to the current situation as probably the most complete example

of an outward-facing, extended service with the highest level of organisational integration with the academic SBUs.

The employability consultant posts were defined during the change process. The posts have a wider range of duties and a higher level of responsibility, including some line management and were established at a grade above that of the existing careers advisers. In the overall expansion of the service, careers adviser roles at the existing grade were retained in the structure, with the existing operational delivery focus, as distinct from the consultancy, coordination and leadership focus of the employability consultants. In the new structure of college careers teams, the careers adviser posts are subordinate to the employability consultants. Crucially, the existing careers advisers had the option of applying for the new employability consultant posts and some of the new employability consultant posts were filled in this way. Unusually for the higher education sector, the employability consultants were formally trained for the management components of their roles, through a substantial programme which included MBA modules.

From the outside, it could be assumed that such significant change might produce equally significant change management issues around the alignment of environment, values and resources (EVR), yet the HoCS reports few such issues. Once understood in detail from the insider's perspective, it can be seen that there was a staged progression from non-extended to extended prior to the move to integration. In moving to integration, the core professional workforce were not required to change the nature of their existing roles to something seen by management as more fit for purpose. Instead, they were invited to apply for new roles, for which there would be training, with the option of choosing not to do so, which would involve trading off sticking with a more familiar role (if not management structure) against higher pay for the new roles. A carefully thought through approach and the application of substantial additional resources enabled this course of action. Arguably, the EVR alignment issues may have been quite different if the strategic direction (E) was accompanied by no additional funding (R), thereby requiring the core professional workforce to change the nature and purpose of their roles (V) with little in the way of choice or reward.

That the change at this university is very significant is clear. It is now also clear that whilst the change is radical, it was planned over an extended period.

*“2009 to 2011 was a two year revolution.”* (HoCS case 5)

What is also clear is that the centre/college based senior management structure worked to bring about a situation which may be unique in the sector (so far). This was not a case of the senior leadership, including the academic SBU leaders, deciding that employability was both important and an issue and then deciding to invest in the enlargement of a central service to deal with the issue. Neither was this a case of the academic SBU leaders accepting that this issue is their primary responsibility and therefore resolving to develop their own individual in-house solutions. Rather it was combination of these factors resulting in the senior leadership, which by definition of their PVC status, includes the leaders of the academic SBUs, opting to create and resource a structure which combines the enlarged central service and the local SBU-based solutions into one unified approach under the leadership of the director of student employability (the HoCS). At the time of writing, the new entity is only just coming fully into operation. Rather like the HoCs in case 4, the HoCs in this case is clear that her role is absolutely at the centre of accountability although possibly with a stronger sense of shaping the detail of the criteria for success.

*“Absolutely, I am projecting scores at that level “(HoCS case 5 on institutional ambitions to be “best of the rest.”)*

*“I (my emphasis) am not promising the moon and stars but I am promising progression.”* (HoCS case 5)

*“We are diversifying the risk portfolio “(HoCS case 5 on spreading indicators of success across several published indicators in addition to DLHE)*

Overall, the organisational approach to employability appears to be one which is intended to play a key part in the drive for a status intended to inform educated guesses about positional returns and place the university very strongly, just behind the “golden triangle” in the positional competition between institutions.

## **Chapter 4: Cross-Case Analysis and Discussion:**

Prior to comparing and contrasting the cases, a brief summary of the starting points in relation to some key categories may be useful. The table below offers an initial representation of each of the cases in relation to a small number of categories.

### **4.1: Starting points:**

The initial categories are as follows:

Institutional “type”-this is simply to show whether the university in question held a university title prior to 1992 or acquired one at that point and whether the broad mission of the institution could be said to be research-led or teaching- led. These items are shown as “pre” or “post” ’92 and “R” or “T.”

General hierarchical status: This is an attempt to reflect each institution’s position in the general hierarchy of status/positional competition. This is not about employability per se, nor the specifics of DLHE -based rankings. Instead it is intended to reflect notional positioning in relation to Margison’s idea of “educated guesses” about institutional status and is linked to employability through the way in which those educated guesses reflect perceptions of personal status returns from attending the institutions in question. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this is of course, subjective and socially constructed and tends to reflect the dominant views of those elements of society with the social capital and established insights to be able to make the educated guesses. This factor is represented in the table in terms of positioning within the sector as a whole and with a notional ranking within the group of cases.

Careers service position-the categorisation of the careers service on the non-extended to integrated scale. This is indicated, as it was in the introductory chapter and in the cases themselves, with category 1 being non-extended and category 4 being (moving to) integrated.

Perceived pace of change in the configuration of organisational resources and capability in relation to employability: This ranges from low to very high as indicated in the introduction and the cases.

In general terms, the range of universities in the case studies avoids extremes. The most prestigious in the perceived status hierarchy is not quite in the category of the very small group which would generally be seen to be right at the top of the elite. Equally, the post'92 institution is a long established and well respected former polytechnic, which would tend to occupy a status position above a substantial number of "newer" (in terms of university title) universities and university colleges. All the universities offer a broad range of subjects. There are no specialist institutions in the group. In terms of size, the universities in the group occupy the middle ground of "full service" universities, with student numbers ranging from c18000 to c24000.

Both the Browne report and government policy since have included the assumption that an emphasis on perceived return on (higher levels of) personal investment by students expressed in terms of high level employment, will be a significant feature of the higher education funding environment and by extension, institutional survival and success, for the foreseeable future. However, the case studies suggest that all institutions in this study had begun serious consideration of employability and had started down the organisational path described, prior to the publication of the Browne report and the government announcements on fees, but in all cases, the post-holders involved in the study felt that this has reinforced the direction of travel and the priority afforded to employability. This tends to reinforce the idea that status/positional competition pre-dates the very recent government drives to something more akin to economic competition and consumerism, which exacerbate and sharpen the positional competition.

Table 1: initial categories.

Case Study	Pre/post '92	Research/Teaching	General status in sector (rank in group)	Careers service position	Pace of change
1	Post 92	T	Medium/Low (5)	Non-extended consolidated	Low
2	Pre 92	R	Medium/High (4)	Moving from non extended to extended	Medium
3	Pre-92	R	High (2=)	Extended-consolidated	Low
4	Pre-92	R	High (1)	Moving to extended-rapid trajectory to integrated from non-extended	Very High
5	Pre-92	R	High (2=)	Moving from extended to integrated	High

#### 4.2: Institutional Identity

A key theme to emerge from the analysis of the case studies was the impact of institutional character and identity. UK universities are significant recipients of public funding, albeit to varying degrees in terms of proportion of income, but they are autonomous organisations, not direct agencies of government. Although the public policy environment and its impact on the expectations of stakeholders are clearly major considerations; institutional autonomy means that this and all other aspects of the environment are translated into strategic analysis and subsequent choice and implementation through the filters of institutional ethos and identity. Understanding of the ways in which the organisations interpret the employability agenda in relation to institutional identity emerged as a critical factor in describing and understanding the institutional positioning, delivery strategy and structural (the what, how and who

levels) choices being made in relation to employability. The case studies showed interesting variations on this dimension.

Although the nature of the enquiry is different, there is a link between this work and the conclusions of the report “Break-Out or break-Up?” (Watts and Butcher 2008), which contrasted the fortunes of the careers services in two pre-’92 universities in which the role, remit and resources of the services were developed, creating extended careers service with the ways in which careers services were effectively broken up and subsumed into other structures in two post-’92 universities. The process of extension has continued in some institutions since the Watts and Butcher report and indeed, the pre’92 universities included in this study are all examples of the continued development of extended careers services in which the remit of the services has broadened beyond the traditional core of Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) and the provision of opportunities for students to meet employers. The extended services have drawn in resources and responsibilities for related activities, such as enterprise or volunteering. Significantly, the extended services in this study all play a central role in the establishment and coordination of work placements and internships, an area of activity which tends to be very much school/faculty-based in most post’92 universities and the pre’92 universities which are former Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs), including those former CATs which are also highly-ranked research-intensive universities (Bath and Surrey for example). One other major area of “extension” is the design, delivery and assessment of career development learning modules within formal curricula.

Watts and Butcher made interesting and valid points about the contrasting nature of careers service development in some different institutions, which could possibly be interpreted as contrasting the fortunes of the “haves and have-nots” in that careers services often reflect their parent universities in resourcing terms, with pre’92s better resourced on average, than post’92s. Although the “extended careers services” included in this study happen to be in pre’92 universities and the one non-extended service is in a pre’92 institution (case 1), the evidence from case 1 suggests that the contrast is not brought about by the pre/post ’92 divide per se. Instead, it is illustrative of the roles played by institutional ethos and identity in creating the conditions for different approaches to the configuration of the employability effort. The fundamental expectation in case 1, that employability should be delivered through the core educational experience for which the leaders of the academic strategic business units should be accountable, could just as easily be applied to

highly ranked-research-intensive, pre'92 former CAT universities such as Bath or Surrey.

Analysis of the “graduate prospects” rankings in “The complete university guide 2012” (Mayfield University Consultants 2011) places both Bath and Surrey in the national top ten and shows that the case 1 university’s strategic goal of being in the top half of the league tables on this measure has been comfortably achieved. Indeed, that university appears to “punch above its weight” on the graduate prospects measure compared to its more general league table standings. On the graduate prospects measure in the table referred to earlier, it is the second highest ranked university of any type from its English region. In the cases of Bath, Surrey and the university in case 1, employability could reasonably be said to be central to the vocational/professional ethos and identity of the universities. It could also be said to be going well in all three cases. The universities of Bath and Surrey both perform very well on DLHE-based employment measures with small to medium sized, non-extended careers services, as does the university in case 1. The non-extended careers services fit with a long-standing distribution of employability resources (including substantial work placement organisations in academic SBUs) and responsibilities determined by institutional identity and ethos, regardless of the fact that two of the institutions are pre'92 and one post '92. Identity matters but it is not simply a matter of pre and post'92.

In relation to institutional ethos, identity and strategy, the notion of that which is core is useful. In case 1, employability is core to identity and mission of the institution as a whole and for the constituent academic SBUs. Employability is core to the university (and was even before it was called “employability”), but the role of the careers service is not core to the strategy for delivering employability. Care should be taken not to confuse non-core with unimportant or not valued in this case. The case study made it clear that the service and its leader are well regarded and play crucial roles as central student service and increasingly, as the source of key management information used to monitor success in relation to employability for the institution as a whole and as a business partner to the academic SBUs. However the institutional strategy and delivery model casts the service in the role of a central resource upon which the academic SBUs can draw in support of their delivery of employability as part of the core educational business. The employability delivery structure is not one in which there is prescribed or strongly recommended partnership working between the service and the academic SBUs in relation to the



delivery of employability through the core educational experience (which is not to say that this does not happen). The service is not at the centre of a hub and spoke model, nor does it play the role of a “strong steering core” (Shattock 2003) in relation to employability, as is arguably the case in some of the other universities in this study. In summary, the professional service in case 1 is a well-regarded, central student-support service in a post’92 university with a strong vocational ethos in which there is a clear expectation that employability will be delivered through the core educational experience, specifically the academic schools. This is not an example of an “extended careers service”, but neither is it an example of a careers service effectively ceasing to exist and/or being regarded as unfit for purpose as was the case for the post ‘92 institutions described in the Watts and Butcher article. This is an institution in which the position of employability in relation to institutional identity and strategy and the position of the careers service in relation to the strategy and delivery structure are in established and successful equilibrium.

In case 1, it would seem that the fact that employability has always been core to the identity and mission of the institution contributes strongly to the successful equilibrium described above. It could be argued that in all the other institutions in this study, employability has not traditionally been core to identity and mission. The four institutions in question would be seen as essentially traditional, non-CAT research-intensive universities with a broad subject base which includes arts humanities and social sciences as well as the science, technology and medicine and health subjects. These are the sorts of institutions which are often stereotyped by commentators as non-vocational “ivory towers” and exhorted through reports such as “Future Fit” (CBI/UUK 2009) to do more in terms of employability, even though major graduate recruiters tend to rate their graduates highly, with all four featuring in the top twenty most employer targeted universities in the UK (High Fliers 2012). The identity of the four universities in question is not that of a Bath or a Surrey. The combinations of history, academic standing, civic connection and a somewhat intangible asset of “prestige” (a manifestation of status and the basis of Marginson’s educated guesses) which make up the identities of these four universities is proudly promoted by the institutions and seen as both a reason for and evidence of, their success to date.

The four universities have vocational elements within their provision. Arguably they have the most overtly vocational provision of all in that all four have medical schools, providing the pre-registration professional education for the future NHS medical

workforce within contractual supply arrangements with the employers. Despite the presence of schools/faculties of medicine and (very often) dentistry, nursing and healthcare, all providing pre-registration professional education on a contractual basis to rigorous professional standards, our four universities and others like them are perceived as high quality, but traditionally academic as distinct from “vocational” or “professionally oriented” institutions.

The universities in cases 2-5 share a position on that which is core, which makes them all different from case 1. In all four cases, employability has not been historically core to the mission of the institutions or the constituent academic SBUs (with the exception of the highly vocational areas mentioned earlier) but the careers services are core to whatever employability strategy is pursued by the institutions. As employability has moved closer to the core of the institutional missions, the positioning of the careers services and their leaders has moved with it and the institutional approaches are being built around the careers services. Interestingly, this has been the approach even in those situations where senior management has felt that the service needed to change in order to be fit for purpose. The four HoCS all confirmed that they felt that at the broadest level, the way that employability is conceptualised in their universities is about effectively adding elements of employability to a traditional, academic education and a first-class student experience, which comes with being a student member of a high-quality university.

The situation in case 1 might be characterised as one in which the professional service supports an approach to employability which is historically and currently embedded in the core educational experience. This university, along with examples such as Bath and Surrey is an institution with an “employability identity” which might be understood as “employability intrinsic” whereas the situation in the other four institutions is one in which the role of the professional service has become that of driving an approach to employability which seeks to overtly add elements of employability to the core educational experience. Case studies 2-5 show that universities share an employability identity which could be called “employability-added”. The evidence from case 1 conveyed a message that employability success is due in no small measure to the institution remaining true to its professional/vocational roots. In organisational terms the institution is determined to do what it has always done, not because of inertia, but because it works. Again there are apparent similarities with Bath and Surrey. A key feature of case 1 is that its employability-intrinsic identity is both historic and current. The extent to which this

is necessarily the case in other ostensibly similar institutions is a theme which is explored later in this study. In the employability-added case studies however, new and different things appear to be happening in pursuit of employability success and it is for this reason that the majority of the cross-case analysis focuses on understanding the detail of the approaches at those universities.

#### **4.3: Core Similarities across the Employability-Added Universities.**

A starting point upon which there was definite common ground was the acknowledgement that all four leaders were in situations in which the institutional view was that a non-extended careers service would not be fit for purpose. There was also agreement on the idea that all four play the part of expert adviser/market interpreter to the senior management and broader university community and that the central professional service through its leader plays a key role in shaping the strategic approach to employability *for the institution as a whole*.

All four HoCS reported that the employability challenge is being met with significant political will and additional resources in their institutions (although the extent to which these vary and affect the nature and pace of change). It is important to note that the allocation of additional resources to the employability effort is taking place against a backdrop of severe resource constraints within higher education, given the 80% cut in teaching funding which coincided with the publication of the Browne review. It would appear that, to some degree, employability is being strategically prioritised over other calls on institutional funds in the four universities in question, to varying degrees. In this regard, it is interesting to reflect on the strategic commitment in case 5 to “disinvest” in areas which do not serve the institutional strategy. Also common across the group was the notion of occupying a role which overtly combines involvement in institutional strategy/policy and networks with managing the central service on the ground. Differences emerged when discussing the operation of central service/academic SBU partnership working in more detail. Across the four institutions, the collaboration is strategically driven in all cases, but the extent to which it is prescribed varies. The case studies show that there is variation around the explicit creation and/or more "organic" development and operation of collaborative network development and delivery structures which span the traditional boundaries between academic SBUs and professional services.

#### **4.4: Professional service/corporate centre/academic SBU structures**

The case studies appeared to indicate a clear gradation of the extent to which the professional service /academic SBU partnership working is prescribed through the translation of strategy into action and resource allocation. Case 3 is the least prescribed. The case study showed the professional service as a central service in a research-intensive academic institution, in which employability, even if officially represented amongst the university's key performance indicators (KPIs), has no significant history as a KPI for faculty deans and heads of school, although this was just becoming a factor at the time of this study. There was an expectation that the HoCS would act as a senior policy adviser/market interpreter to the executive and the broader university community and would have direct input to the shaping of delivery strategy through senior committees and "dotted line" accountability to the Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching. The notion of partnership working between the "expert" professional service and the academic SBUs was enshrined in the high-level delivery strategy, but the operational configuration of that partnership was not prescribed at this level.

In this case, the policy/strategy level influence of the central service and its director was very clear and there was perceived sharing (between the central service and the academic SBUs) of responsibility for the key employment-related KPIs. There was a logical expectation that the academic SBUs and the professional service would work together in pursuit of employability goals and the HoCS reports that this is what happens in practice. There was however, no institutional prescription of the nature, extent and structure of this activity. The HoCS felt that there are expectations that he will have an overall picture of the ways in which the university community as a whole is pursuing the employability agenda and be in a position to present this to senior management and in higher level governance committees. The case study showed that the service in general and the HoCS in particular are the organisational community leaders in relation to the employability agenda. However the HoCS did not feel that he has a mandate or responsibility for the creation and/or direct management of a pan-university delivery organisation.

Case 2 appeared to be at the next level of organisational prescription. The case study indicated that joint central service/school faculty team based approaches to the employability effort within the academic SBUs were starting to feature in the institutional delivery strategy (as distinct from ad-hoc arrangements "on the ground",

which may have existed already) and that these have implications for the role of the HoCS and the staff of the central service. This seems to be particularly true in relation to undergraduate curriculum review and this process puts great emphasis on partnership working between the central service and the academic SBUs in the context of a clear intention to deliver employability through the core educational experience and to assign KPIs to the academic SBUs.

As seen in the case study, the academic SBUs must bring in the professional service and the service must deliver, in support of a plan, which is shared in concept and execution but which remains the *subject* plan in terms of accountability and in terms of the employability offer to current and prospective students. On the face of it, this new configuration could intensify environment, values and resources (EVR) alignment challenge for the HoCS, which were mentioned at the end of the case study, given that a core professional workforce with a history of providing a relatively reactive, central service to individual students will be required to emphasise the academic consultancy role in the context of the SLAs. The HoCS confirmed that this is indeed impacting directly upon the role descriptions of this group of staff.

The strategy suggests that only those subject plans which visibly involve the professional service will be regarded as legitimate and strategically fit for purpose, but there is no sense in which the detailed content of those plans would be centrally prescribed. The expression of strategically required partnership through pseudo-contractual mechanism tends to make the configuration of the employability similar to that in case 4 (see below) but with a lower level of central prescription.

Case 4 was one of the two case studies (along with case 5) in which a new structure for the institutional employability effort has been formally created. There is a clear expectation that the HoCS role will sit at the head of the central service *and* at the hub of a faculty network structure, directing both centrally based staff and resources and those based in academic faculties, with a mixture of line management accountability. In common with case 2 the university in case 4 seems to be pursuing a line of SLA-based mutual expectations between the professional service and the academic SBUs but with a far greater degree of centralised prescription, borne of executive determination to “fix” the employability “problem.”

Whilst the HoCS is clear that he has both mandate and accountability for the direction and coordination of a pan-institutional employability structure and the

related results, he faces a challenge in terms of managing an entity which is part directly line-managed (the professional service) and part “network management” (the employability activity in the academic SBUs).

Case 5 is also one in which a new structure for the institutional employability effort has been formally created. As with case 4, there is a clear expectation that the HoCS role will sit at the head of the central service *and* at the hub of a faculty network structure, directing both centrally based staff and resources and those based in academic faculties, but with a greater degree of direct line management control/accountability. The sense of mandate and accountability is present as it is in case 4, but the structure is arguably more substantial and straightforward.

Each college has its own dedicated team of employability staff, identified with the college and effectively delivering a local careers and employability service physically in situ and tailored to the college’s students, but directly line managed by the central professional service (the careers and employability centre or CEC). The team comprises staff posts (careers adviser, internships and work experience officer, careers information assistant and application support adviser) and some student helpers, all led by the college careers consultant. Alongside this group, which looks and to all intents and purposes is in fact, a mini-careers service, there is a wider college employability team under a “college senior academic employability lead” comprising college based staff with full substantive roles which are not exclusively concerned with employability, but which contribute in some way (such as educational enhancement fellows and alumni relations officers) or who have a directly relevant component within a broader role (academics who are careers tutors, for example). The college careers consultant has “dotted line” accountability to the senior academic employability lead, but “solid line” (direct line management) accountability to the CEC assistant director for career development. The structure allows for the sort of tailored, local provision which might arise if each college invented its own service, with the coherence, consistency and economy of scale (some staff with fractional posts in more than one college for example) which comes from a single team with coordinated leadership.

Case 5 is the classic “hub and spoke” model of a network organisation. The “mainstream” service is delivered in the colleges, whilst the strategic overview and some specialised, coordinating or cross-college functions sit at the centre in the CEC. The director of student employability, together with four assistant directors

(career development, entrepreneurship and innovation, information, employer relations) and other senior specialists are based at the CEC. The five college careers consultants report to the assistant director (career development). In this organisation, the director of student employability (the HoCS) has clear leadership and management responsibility for both the central service and the distributed network. It may be more accurate to describe this as situation in which the professional service itself is both central and distributed.

The HoCS made it clear that her vision is that the CEC itself will ultimately become a central policy/strategy headquarters, with all face to face delivery taking place in the five colleges and some other student-facing satellite locations, notably the student guild (union). It is this distribution of activity and workforce which makes this the truest version of the hub and spoke model in the sector at present and the most advanced in the direction of an integrated service. Even in the most strongly academically-connected careers services, such as Leeds, which has lead careers consultants for each of the university's nine faculties and a large portfolio of locally tailored career development modules, the members of the core professional workforce are centrally-based, are deployed from and return to, this central base from their work in the academic SBUs and all contribute to a very substantial programme of face to face delivery at the careers centre, which is seen as the primary campus location for face to face careers delivery for all-comers, as well as being the strategy and policy HQ. There is one long-standing example of a multi-institution hub and spoke model in which The Careers Group, University of London, provides in-situ careers services to many of the colleges of the University of London, which are united through the University of London system of degree awards, but which are otherwise independent institutions. (Imperial College and the LSE run their own careers services).

#### **4.5: Increasing engagement with the professional service**

The case study evidence in all four employability-added cases indicated a pattern in which the key underlying message promulgated to students and staff in the academic SBUs is that the way to enhance employability is to have more contact with the professional careers service. It could be argued that this flows naturally from the core position occupied by each of the services in relation to their university's approach to employability. However, the principal tactics employed to bring this about vary quite significantly across the group. In case 2, the main tactic

seems to be to emphasise the reputation of the careers service. The professional service is the respected authority on employability matters. The service has won numerous national awards, enjoys a very high profile externally and is clearly seen as a significant asset to the university. The university's web pages for prospective students carry a small number of video clips one of which is entitled "careers and employability." This clip features the Pro-Vice Chancellor (L&T) and some students commenting on the excellence of the careers service and the range and value of co-curricular activities at the university.

The following statement appears in every programme entry in the undergraduate study section of the university website: "To find out more about how the University's award-winning Careers Service can help you make the most of your time in (the university city) and prepare you for life after graduation, go to: (careers service website). "The service and its leader are shapers of institutional strategy, trusted market interpreters and brokers of employer relationships. The university has strongly supported its highly-regarded professional service, placing it among the most comprehensive and largest in the country, with one of the better staff/student ratios. The professional service and the academic SBUs are severally accountable for employability KPIs but the HoCS reports a strong sense of shared ownership through relatively long-standing, strategically framed but essentially voluntary, partnership working. Consultation and partnership working between the service and the academic SBUs is an implicit expectation and the account from the HoCs confirmed that this takes place to a very significant extent. This flows from institutional strategy and the standing of the service, but it is not a requirement flowing from the creation of a new structure or managerial directive in terms of the ways in which employability offers should be configured across the institution.

Whilst the theme of "more contact with the careers service is common to all four institutions, it could be argued that the approaches in cases 2, 4 and 5 share a feature which is not so evident in case 3. This feature might be described as attempts to make engagement with the service structurally unavoidable in the academic SBUs. The evidence from the case studies shows how the spirit of making engagement structurally unavoidable is common to the three universities, but the chosen mechanisms are different. The curriculum review process in case 2 does not prescribe what the outcomes of consultation (the detail of the subject employability plans) should be, but seems designed to make the use of the expertise of the professional service by the academic SBUs an unavoidable feature of curriculum



development. This in turn, appears to be intended to ensure that engagement with the professional service becomes an unavoidable feature of the core educational experience for the individual student. In case 4, the approach is similar in terms of making interaction unavoidable, but with a far higher degree of prescription and a greater sense of the desired inputs being driven by the professional service as an agent of the corporate “centre.” In case 5, there is a curriculum consultancy role for the professional service, but the principal tactic for ensuring greater contact with the professional careers service is the physical re-location of the front line service to the colleges and the related sense of identity with and ownership by, those academic SBUs and their communities of staff and students.

#### **4.6: The maturity of the extended central professional service**

Within the employability added cases, the configuration of the employability efforts in cases 3 and 5 could be seen as being at opposite ends of an organisational continuum, which has the binary model of case 3 (academic SBUs recommending an excellent but separate central professional service) at one end and the unitary model of case 5 (a service physically integrated into the academic SBUs) at the other. However, closer analysis might suggest that the two cases have an important underlying similarity, which is also a contrast with cases 2 and 4. The situations in cases 3 and 5 reflect the relative maturity and pre-existing standing of the careers service organisations.

As the case studies showed, the careers services at all the employability added universities have experienced key moments of change which have set them on the road to their current core positioning. The key moments in case 3 pre-date the others. That change (the merger with the enterprise and curriculum development units outlined in the case study) was steered through by the current leader and involved all of the current management team. The service has been a high profile, extended service for a number of years and is more mature in its current configuration, than any of the other services in the employability added universities. However, as the case studies demonstrated, the nature of change in case 5 to being an overtly extended service through the acquisition of a broader remit to include enterprise and co-curricular skills development was very similar indeed to that in case 3, although it occurred a little later. The scale and range of activities and the internal structure of the two services are almost identical. The key difference in the organisation of the two services is in the physical distribution of the “front line”

student-facing service. The very prominent public profile and strength of recommendation in case 3 and the substantial investment in case 5 could be interpreted as significant institutional statements of confidence in the existing careers services and their leaders as the cornerstones of each university's approach to employability.

In contrast, to the situations in cases 3 and 5, it could be suggested that whilst the professional services are central to the institutional approaches in cases 2 and 4, both of the current service leaders were brought in specifically to drive change within the existing central services as well as to play strategic roles in the institutional employability effort. In both cases, the service leaders have been given and have actively engaged with, the remit to develop the existing organisations from non-extended to extended services. Although the intention was not stated in these terms, it can be seen that the drive has been to make the services more akin to the extended, outward looking, academically respected organisations already in place in cases 3 and 5. In case 2, this was a result of a service review, which resulted in the appointment of the current leader to begin the process of change at approximately the time that the transition to extended service was taking place in case 5. In relation to the “post-Browne era” this has allowed the service some time to evolve into a position to be core to the institutional employability effort as it developed, albeit from a later starting point than cases 3 and 5. As we have seen, the most recent leadership appointment was in case 4 where the approach was to remit the newly recruited leader to drive the central service change and the implementation of the whole institutional, corporate approach to employability rapidly and at the same time.

#### **4.7: Issue awareness and executive-level drive**

All of the HoCS in the study reported that employability is seen as important in their universities. However, the notion of “issue awareness” in relation to corporate strategy (Johnson and Scholes 1993) is useful here. Issue awareness refers to that element of strategy making which asks the question “is there something amiss?” or “is there a problem which must be fixed?” in order for the organisation’s strategy to be successfully pursued. A strategic consideration such as employability can be important without necessarily being “an issue.”

If the five universities were to be placed on a continuum which ran from “employability is important but not an issue” at one end to “important and an issue”

at the other, cases 1 and 3 would be positioned close to the “not an issue” end and certainly closer to that end than any of the other three. Issue awareness (and the related pace of change) is low because the established approach seems to work very well. Both universities perform well in relation to their DLHE (and positional competition)-based KPIs. On this measure, the university in case 3 is close to the “best of the rest” position to which the university in case 5 aspires. Institutional strategy for employability and the position of the professional careers service within it appear to be in established, successful equilibrium.

A related aspect of the way in which the approaches are playing out, is the interplay between issue awareness and executive level determination to fix “the problem.” where one is perceived. This is the area in which we can see the key similarity between cases 4 and 5. Of the case study institutions, these are the two at which the service leaders have a very clear sense of responsibility and accountability for pan-institutional delivery organisations and league table-related results. They are the leaders of employability entities, which are based on and subsume the original careers services. The service leaders in cases 2 and 3 lead services which are central to the institutional strategy, but remain distinct central careers services. The evidence showed cases 4 and 5 to be the two in the group at which issue awareness is strongest and both HoCS felt that the issue had been met with swift, decisive and directive executive action from the Vice Chancellors and their immediate senior leadership colleagues.

It was interesting to observe from the case studies, the similarity in the overall management structures recently adopted in both cases 4 and 5 and to learn of a senior management connection between the two. Both universities have adopted a “college” system, which arguably concentrates political and financial power into the hands of a relatively small group which combines the executive leadership of the university “centre” and the academic SBUs (the “tax-payers” and ultimate funders of most discretionary activity). Both institutions have very high profile Vice Chancellors who have very recently occupied national, sector wide leadership roles. As seen in the case study, the college system in case 5 literally combines the roles of Head of College and institutional Pro Vice Chancellor. In case 4, the Vice Chancellor is also designated “Chief Executive.” This is also one of a number of universities in the country at which the role of a Registrar who heads the entire non-academic workforce is also that of a very powerful “chief operating officer” or similar. In this

particular case, the Registrar is designated “Deputy Chief Executive” and, as it happens, joined the university from the university in case 5.

Adoption of and/or pressure towards more directive, private sector-style “managerialism” has been a topic of debate in higher education for some time now (Deem 2010, 2009, 2008) and is sometimes seen in a very negative light and contrasted unfavourably with more benign (at least for the academic workforce) collegial structures (Halsey 1997). This debate is beyond the scope of this study, but there is no suggestion here that the structures observed in the case studies are not mitigated by more traditional collegial structures such as senates and councils. However, it could be argued that the combination of the college structures and strong direction by the chief executives in cases 4 and 5 served to create the conditions for relatively rapid change and allocation of substantial resources. Certainly, the HoCs at both universities felt that they had benefited from unequivocal senior management backing, accompanied by swift and decisive action and noted that other feature which is often seen as an aspect of “managerialism”, namely being in no doubt about sharp personal accountability for tangible results.

#### **4.8: Strategic capability**

As positional competition between universities has been sharpened and intensified employability has become increasingly seen as an area in which comparison is actively encouraged and corporate success in employability has become an area in which universities can and do, seek to pursue competitive advantage. The link to notions of private-sector managerialism in this context lies in consciously organising for competitive advantage. This is an area in which models of strategic management from the “mainstream” management literature, (Johnson, Whittington and Scholes 2011, Thompson and Martin 2005, Mintzberg and Quinn 1991) typically (though not exclusively) conceived for application in the private sector, can be usefully applied. Critics of higher education managerialism might suggest that the corporate, institutional level driver for considering employability performance is not the question “are we doing the best for our students?” but “how does our outcome performance compare with that of other universities, (especially perceived peers)?” All of the managers involved in this study see the driver of inter-institutional comparison and competition as the practical reality of their organisational context and remit, but they also see the strategic imperatives within their institutions strengthening their hand in doing the best for students, which is something that they would always seek to do.

In the case study institutions and no doubt, in many others, executive leaders and HoCS-level managers are expressing their awareness of the ways in which the new fee regime and the governmental encouragement of informed consumer choice highlights both outcomes and quality of experience. As students and parents (of traditional-age undergraduates) are being encouraged to think that fees are both investments in the employability return and a here-and-now payment for employability development and support, the leaders and managers in this study conveyed a sense of duality of purpose in relation to both the employability outcomes for graduates and the employability offer to incoming and current students.

A useful strategic management concept to consider here is that of strategic capability, concerned with the configuration and deployment of organisational resources and competences and defined as “the adequacy and suitability of the resources and competences of an organisation to survive and prosper” (Johnson, Scholes and Whittington 2006). This builds on the notion of “core competencies” (Hamel and Prahalad 1994). For the purpose of clarity here, the term strategic capability will be used. Strategic capability is not simply the aggregate of resources (even if the institution in question has more of the resource than its competitors) or skills (things which the organisation is good at). Instead, capability is brought about by the purposive configuration of resources and skills in relation to the environment. Strategic capability necessarily provides value for the customer and genuine competitive advantage for the organisation, which is long-lasting and difficult to copy. The resources deployed to create strategic capability need not necessarily all be tangible such as staff, buildings or cash. In status/positional competition in higher education the intangible resource of “prestige” can be very powerful. It can also be the case that organisations can deploy resources which they do not technically own. The attractiveness of the city in which a university is located for example, can be a significant non-owned resource.

It could be argued that long before the term employability was coined, some universities had the essence of a strategic capability in employability built into their foundations in an explicit purposive sense. It could be said that this was particularly true of the former Colleges of Advanced Technology, whose numbers include not only Bath and Surrey as described earlier, but also Aston, Bradford, Brunel, City, Loughborough, and Salford. (The two other CATs established in 1956 were Chelsea and Cardiff. These institutions were ultimately merged into King’s College and

Cardiff University respectively). This could also be said to be true of at least some of the Polytechnics. These institutions were established in such a way that their technological, professional and vocational missions ensured that their resources were configured to support close industrial collaboration, the teaching of industry-relevant knowledge and skills and a high proportion of sandwich degree programmes.

This tradition was acknowledged in the Wilson Review of University–Business Collaboration (Wilson 2012):

*“A small number of universities in the UK provide the majority of sandwich placements, in particular those with a tradition of sandwich courses: for example, Loughborough University, University of Surrey, University of Bath, Brunel University, Aston University, Bournemouth University and Ulster University; interestingly five were Colleges of Advanced Technology 40 years ago and two have the genes of a Polytechnic.”* (The Wilson review 2012 p.38).

The Wilson report uses data from HESA to identify the “top seven” sandwich course providers in the UK. The same dataset shows the university in case 1 to be in the top ten and this statistic was quoted by both the HoCS and the PVC when interviewed for this study. For most if not all of the institutions mentioned, their historical provenance is the bedrock of an employability-intrinsic identity. The evidence in case 1 suggests that the conscious maintenance of that identity and strong resistance to mission-drift are seen by that university to be fundamental to a modern strategic capability which generates genuine competitive advantage in employability.

An interesting resource development in case 1 was the development by the professional careers service of a sophisticated but user friendly way of analyzing and reporting on graduate destinations data, which, as the case study showed, is being used by the institution corporately and in the academic SBUs to understand performance in relation to KPIs in this area. At the time, the development was becoming known in professional circles and subsequently, the service won a national award in recognition of the development and has successfully launched a software product, which is being purchased by other institutions. It could be argued that the enhanced capability which the software development created for the university enhanced a core competence in employability and that making the product commercially available to other institutions might undermine that core

competence by making something which was arguably difficult to copy, very easy to copy. In fact that which is being made easy to copy is the resource, not the capability.

The strategic employability imperative, together with the positioning of the HoCS in relation to discussion of corporate goals (the strategy map as distinct from the L&T strategy) which led to the backing for the development are the key factors in the software development contributing to the core competence. The acquisition of the software product in itself is no guarantee of a similar approach in another institution. The product is relatively inexpensive and is being marketed on a service to service basis. For many purchasers its appeal lies in the effective automation of an otherwise time consuming, mechanistic task, arising from a statutory compliance exercise and so, the institutional impact of this local, service-level purchasing decision may go no further than that. It may be acquired as a low-level operational resource, but not necessarily as part of a strategy-level consideration of capability.

In case 1, the historical roots of an employability-intrinsic identity were seen as a fit for purpose and rigorously pursued basis for strategic capability to achieve current strategic goals relating to employability. This may or may not be the case for all institutions with similar roots. Employability-intrinsic roots in the past are in themselves, no guarantee of competitive advantage today. It is interesting to note that whilst the university in case 1 is the second highest ranked former polytechnic on the graduate prospects score in the 2012 Complete Universities Guide, with a place inside the top thirty (of 116), it is also the case that four other former polytechnics occupy places in the bottom ten.

There is a clear recognition of a vigorously protected and promoted employability-intrinsic identity and associated strategic capability in case 1. The other four universities do not share this historical provenance or identity and in that sense, the study shows them creating employability-related strategic capability in employability-added universities. To varying degrees they appear to be developing capabilities in the area of employability through “the capacity to renew competencies so as to achieve congruence with the changing business environment by adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring internal and external organizational skills, resources, and functional competencies” (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen 1997).

The development of capability in this way can occur at unit level as well as the corporate level, especially in large, devolved organisations such as universities.

Case 3 suggests that the HoCS and his team had created new service-level capabilities through merger and reconfiguration. For example, the bringing together of careers guidance and business start up support, created new capability by positioning starting a business as a career option in the same space in which students would naturally consider the broad range of career options. This enabled more informed engagement with business start-up via the careers guidance element of the service, whilst the experience of the business start-up team helped to inform the careers education and guidance aspects of the service in relation to the critical graduate attribute of “commercial awareness” (Gilworth, Thambar, Aspinall and Wilkinson 2006). This particular development of capability was pursued by a small number of university careers services at the same time and one of the others was the university in case 5. The account from the HoCs in case 3 suggests that new capability was generated by the ways in which resources were purposefully linked together, not by their existence per se. The case study showed a similar pattern in the way in which the integration of the curriculum development team and its external career development modules addressed both the internal student skills development agenda and the university’s mission-critical regional engagement priorities. Over time, the service has taken on the leadership of cross institutional capability through its coordination of the way in which co-curricular development opportunities and their relevance to employability are presented to students. By the time that the case study was written, the university had confidence in its approach to employability, which seemed to be largely based on incrementally developed strategic capability largely based around and led by, the professional service. Capability originally developed at unit level had been extended and deployed at both the central corporate and SBU levels. The capability of “our award winning careers service” is visibly utilised by the academic SBUs.

The story of development of capability at unit level in case 5 was very similar to that in case 3. The unit-level capability in the careers service was recognised and valued at the executive and SBU levels. The key difference in case 5 was that the university at the corporate level had made a conscious choice to take the unit level capability and develop it into institutional strategic capability, adapting, integrating, reconfiguring and expanding resources in a purposeful fashion.

The university senior management structure in case 5 ensured that central executive buy-in and SBU buy-in were effectively one and the same. Given the high level of issue awareness, the university could have invested an identical amount of



money in the expansion of the central service, which had a high profile and was performing well. Equally, as the high level of issue awareness was likely to have been shared at the most senior levels in the SBUs, given the PVC structure, the individual SBUs could have made a similar aggregate investment in SBU based resources. Either of these courses of action would have called new employability resources into being, but neither would have achieved the level of strategic capability brought about by the configuration which was actually chosen.

Whilst the academic SBUs in case 3 make use of the incrementally developed capability of the central professional service in presenting their offer to potential and current students, the academic SBUs in case 5 have been able to take the similar capability of their own institution's professional service and physically deploy it in the students' academic "home" with a real sense of ownership. As previously mentioned, the link to "our award winning careers service" is made on the web pages intended for potential students in each subject area in case 3, whereas an example from case 5 is "there is a College of Arts and Law careers team based in the Arts building to help get you ready for the world beyond university." In developing its strategic capability, this university has expanded and configured its resources in such a way as to enable academic SBUs to provide and promote in-situ careers services, whilst maintaining the accumulated benefits of the incrementally developed capability of the central service and avoiding unnecessary and costly "wheel re-invention" at the local level. As 93% of the Times Top 100 employers cite university careers services as their preferred channel to potential graduate recruits (High Fliers 2012), the employer appeal of a hub and spoke service with such direct channels into academic SBUs is likely to be great. It is interesting to note that the High Fliers league table of the top twenty most targeted campuses showed that university in case 5 moved into the top ten for the first time ever in 2012.

Case 4 showed perhaps the highest levels of issue awareness and executive determination to "fix" the "problem" of employability. However, the university did not have the incrementally developed unit-level capability available in cases 2 and 5. Comparatively speaking, the university was in the position of needing to develop strategic capability from a standing start. In the circumstances, the university did what many organisations do when faced with the need to rapidly accelerate strategic capability, which is to bring in expertise from outside in the shape of the new HoCS, with the mandate to drive change. The case study shows the university vigorously deploying the resource of determined central direction from the top. This resource is

critical to enabling the HoCs as the principal change agent to deliver against his mandate, which can be seen to be that of simultaneously developing strategic capability at central unit and SBU levels and between the central unit and the SBUs collectively, to create an institutional capability. In discharging this challenging responsibility, the nature and level of the appointment is such that the HoCS is not also required to operationally manage the central unit on a day to day basis. This is a useful contrast with case 2.

The HoCS in case 2 appeared to be in the most ambiguous position in relation to the development of strategic capability. The background to his appointment was the need for change at unit level. As in case 4, the need to develop capability was dealt with by bringing in a new leader from outside, but unlike case 4, where the new leader was brought in at a higher level with a cross institutional strategic remit, with the previous HoCS remaining to continue in an operational management role; the new leader was brought in as a direct replacement for and at the same level as, the outgoing HoCS. In this case, the HoCS' remit seemed to be to manage the central unit in a different way than his predecessor, developing new strategic capability at the unit level. Part of managing the central unit in a new way was to become more involved in the development of university wide capability in the employability area and to bring the staff of the service along with him. It seemed clear that the vehicle for configuring resources to generate SBU and thereby aggregate, university-level strategic capability was the learning and teaching strategy, particularly curriculum review requiring partnership working between the SBUs and the central service. Whilst the unit level and institutional tasks appeared to be simultaneous as they were in case 4 rather than sequential as in cases 3 and 5, the HoCs in case 2 did not appear to have the same strength of resource in terms of mandate underpinned by very strong issue awareness at the highest level. The situation for the HoCS in case 2 is further complicated by the overt linking of a developing capability in employability with what is seen as an existing capability in widening participation.

#### **4.9: Students as an “employability input” – educating and informing incoming students (co-production).**

Co-production is central to success in status/positional competition in higher education. Therefore, a critical source which contributes significantly to strategic capability in employability terms is the nature of the student body and its capability and propensity to engage with the development of employability in the spirit of co-production.

The impact of the institutional approach to employability on recruitment and selection of incoming students was raised by the HoCS in case 4. This was of particular interest because it brings to life the interplay between several key factors emerging from the study as a whole namely executive determination in the face of clear issue awareness, institutional ethos and identity and the notion of co-production between universities and students

All of the universities in the study (in common with many others in the sector) seek to convey messages about employability to potential students, with the example quoted from case 3 being a good illustration. These messages tend to be about what the experience of being a successful student at the institution in question can provide to the potential student in employability terms. Essentially, they are messages about the employability offer, which enables *engaged* students to succeed. The student case studies used are invariably examples of students actively engaged in the necessary co-production (as distinct from passive consumerism) of their own employability and are intended to encourage potential students to see the institution as one in which they could do something similar. The messages are about encouragement towards engagement with employability, once admitted to the institution, but there was no evidence from any of the institutions in the study about the selection of students on the basis of propensity to engage successfully in the co-production of employability. However, future consideration of this latter possibility was raised by the HoCS in case 4. This was raised in the context of it being a logical consideration for an executive determined to ensure corporate success in employability terms.

If employability success is the outcome of co-production, then the likelihood that students will successfully engage with the (substantially resourced) offer must be a key input, therefore it would make sense to consider ways of assuring the quality and quantity of that input and by extension, the added value generated from the institutional investment in the offer. The HoCS felt that this issue, though potentially controversial could be raised and would receive serious consideration. Indeed the HoCs felt that the terms upon which courses are offered to potential students could even be up for discussion

*“we might think about whether we should do a Bath”* (HoCS case 4)

The suggestion of “doing a Bath” referred to the idea of changing the structure of the undergraduate degree programme offer from three years to four years with industrial

placements as standard. In the context of this study, this could be seen as an example of high level issue awareness and executive determination to fix the issue taking the institutional thinking about employability into territory which might be off-limits otherwise. Indeed this could be seen as a situation in which, having been initially shaped by institutional ethos and identity the strategic approach to employability could actually instigate debate around the possibility of changing aspects of institutional ethos and identity. As mentioned earlier, the identity of the employability added universities in this study is not that of a Bath a Surrey. This particular university “doing a Bath” would constitute a radical change to the university’s identity in the interests of employability. As the HoCS made clear, this may not happen, but the idea that it may be legitimately open to discussion is quite remarkable, as is the idea that employability considerations could influence the ways in which students are recruited and selected.

An element of the folklore of British higher education which is linked to and reinforces Marginson’s notion of co production is that perceived characteristics of the student body influence the identity of a university to the extent that certain universities tend to attract certain “types” of students in a self-perpetuating fashion. The HoCS at university C feels that his institution is one such and that the traditional student “type” at the university is not as employability-motivated as those of similar academic standing at some other institutions. An interesting contrast is provided by an account from a HoCS at an institution not included in this study. The university in question is an elite institution, usually found towards the top of most league tables, including those for graduate-level destinations. The careers service was contacted by a highly selective City employer concerned about the lack of response from the university’s students to a “bring a friend” graduate recruitment campaign. The HoCS explained to the author that in her view the students at her institution are highly employability-motivated and also acutely attuned to the competitive nature of elite graduate recruitment. She felt that the students would have responded to the invitation as individuals but that the “bring a friend” campaign would have less appeal as it would require students to consciously add to their competition. The point of including this anecdote here is that it offers an illustration of an institution at which the employability motivation element of the student input to co-production is seen to be firmly in place amongst the “type” of student typically admitted to the institution. The idea of an institution taking steps to alter the profile of the student body from what is has traditionally been to something different in pursuit of

employability success seems like a radical and long-term proposition, but it serves to illustrate the power and circularity of co-production.

The notion of including the propensity to actively engage with the employability offer in student attraction and recruitment processes creates a link between this study and the much broader debates around social mobility. The value of social capital in elite graduate recruitment is strongly argued by Brown and Hesketh amongst others. It is also central to Marginson's notion of educated guesses about personal positional returns from higher education and the associated winner-takes-all basis of positional competition as it is exacerbated by economic competition. A detailed exposition of the notion of social capital is beyond the scope of this study, but a simplified version of the employability implications might suggest that students from middle class backgrounds are more likely than those from lower socio-economic groups to be long standing participants in education and community based clubs, societies and activities. They are also more likely to have learned the "CV" benefits of such activities from their parents and to bring that understanding and propensity to get involved into their university experience. As a result of this, the middle class students are more likely to engage in the activities valued by elite employers and therefore will be more likely to obtain the elite graduate jobs, thereby helping to perpetuate social reproduction in the graduate opportunity structure.

The potential employability benefits of participation in co-curricular activities, particularly student clubs and societies and volunteering is frequently cited by universities and by student unions and can have a bearing on the configuration of the employability offer. Indeed numerous institutions, often in partnership with their student unions have established skills-based award schemes which seek to codify and reward co-curricular activity as part of the institution's employability effort. The York Award, the Manchester Leadership Programme and Warwick Advantage are just a few of the current examples. Three of the universities in this study have such programmes.

The potential employability benefits of social capital are also manifest in networks and contacts, enabling comparative ease of access for middle class students to opportunities, especially for work experience. The logic of this argument, applied to the idea of attempting to assure student input to employability co-production through recruitment could suggest that the best way to do this would be to ensure that the student intake contained the highest possible proportion of middle class students. Of

course, this would run counter to government and institutional attempts to widen participation and indeed, the widening participation obligations placed upon universities in relation to their access agreements with the Office of Fair Access (OFFA) as part of the “deal” in being allowed to charge the maximum £9000 tuition fee (as will be the case in all the universities in this study, except case 1). There is no suggestion here that widening participation as a strategic goal for the universities in this study or any others is anything other than a sincerely held values-driven aim. It is also the case that some universities such as those in cases 1 and 2 in this study might wish to make a positioning virtue out of being “accessible.”

Quite apart from this contractual issues, the obvious issues of social justice and potential conflict with other aspects of institutional strategy; the evidence from one case in this study tends not to support the idea of an entirely straightforward relationship between the social class make up of the student intake, effective engagement with the employability offer and subsequent employability success for the institution in terms of the main public measures.

For the university in case 4, the social class make up of the student intake is already heavily biased towards middle class students to a degree which is well above the average for the sector and above the official expectations for the institution. If social class alone ensured employability success for the institution, “top ten” comparative employability performance would not be an issue. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) publishes performance indicators, set against institutional benchmarks for the proportions of the student intake from state schools and from lower socio-economic groups (SEGs). In the published tables, HESA appends a + or - sign to the scores where they are deemed to be significantly above or below the benchmark set for the institution. Recent data (HESA 2011) shows this university (case 4) performing significantly below its benchmark on both of these widening participation measures. The 2009/10 young (not classed as “mature”) undergraduate intake was deemed to contain 68.1 % from state schools against a benchmark of 75.8% and only 15.5% from lower SEGs against a benchmark of 19.7%. The HESA figures suggest that of the universities (excluding a small number of very small specialist institutions such as music conservatoires) in the table, this university had the sixth lowest proportion of state school pupils (after Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, Imperial and UCL) and the fourth lowest proportion of students from lower SECs (after Cambridge, Oxford and Durham). The University of Bath also significantly underperforms against benchmark on both measures, but has

higher scores for state school (74.2%) and lower SEC (17.3%) students. Surrey has a state school proportion of 91.4% (significantly over performing against benchmark) and a lower SEC proportion of 23.1% (a significant under performance against benchmark). The university in case 1 significantly out-performs its benchmark on both measures with 97.9% state school (bench mark 94.5%) and 40.2% lower SEC (benchmark 34.8%). As previously shown, these institutions are all successful in employability terms and Bath is certainly seen as an example of performance to which the university in case 4 would aspire.

The reason that the HoCS in case 4 was discussing “doing a Bath” in relation to the nature of the student intake was his sense that the stereotypical “type” of upper middle class student attracted to the university has tended to be less inclined than other “types” to combine their social capital advantages with a drive towards active engagement in the co-production of their employability. The suggestion was that sandwich courses might attract a different student type in terms of employability motivation.

The purpose of discussing issues of social capital and social class here is not to attempt to negate the social capital argument, which the author finds compelling and which is understood by all of the participants in this study. Instead, the idea is to suggest that there may be other important factors to consider for an institution which might choose to manipulate the motivations of incoming students intake as an input to the co-production of employability success. An employability-added university seeking to “do a Bath”, would need to be attempting to alter its employability identity from employability-added to employability-intrinsic. Assuming that the university in question was able to overcome the not insignificant challenge of re-configuring its core educational offer to fit with a different employability identity, it would then need to be able to convey that identity to potential students who might choose the employability- intrinsic option amongst courses/ institutions with broadly similar academic demands, against competition from other institutions with a long established employability-intrinsic identity and possibly culturally established notions of the “type” of student that it has historically attracted. The risk of alienating the traditional audience whilst failing to capture a sufficient share of the new market could be significant.

Pursuing a change of employability identity on a whole-institution basis would be a mammoth undertaking for even the most issue-aware and determined university.

This is not to say that such change could not be attempted at the level of the academic SBU or more specifically individual programmes within the SBUs. For example, Bath and Surrey with their traditionally employability- intrinsic identity, offer their undergraduate degrees in Psychology as four year sandwich courses. The university in case 5, which as this study suggests, has an employability-added identity, offers a four year degree in psychology with psychological practice which contains compulsory, university organised work placement, alongside a more "standard" three year psychology degree which does not contain this element. Psychology is an extremely popular subject at undergraduate level and is offered by a large number of institutions. All three of the universities mentioned have historically been selectors, rather than recruiters in this subject, with entry qualifications set at a very high level (typically AAA at A level). In this sense, the four year degree at university in case 5 could be seen to sit alongside those at Bath and Surrey in appealing to potential students with the interest in the subject, the necessary high level of academic attainment and the employability motivation to choose a four year programme over the many three year programmes on offer, in the interests of employability. The four year degree at the university in case 5 is an integrated undergraduate Masters programme (MSci) and in that sense could be seen to offer something extra in the market context, but for the purposes of this discussion, the key point is that it is an employability-intrinsic programme in a traditionally employability-added university. Perhaps this mixed economy approach might be a more feasible option than wholesale identity change in terms of introducing some overt elements of employability motivation into the student intake, whilst mitigating the risks attached to a more fundamental shift of employability identity. It could be speculated that, over time, if the employability-intrinsic options within a mixed economy proved popular, this could lead to a gradual evolutionary shift in employability identity. If this happened in an employability-added university, there could be a fundamental re-appraisal of the distribution of roles and resources in an institutional employability effort which had been set up for a predominantly employability-added approach.

It may be reasonable to suggest that a radical switch of employability identity may be a step too far for even the most issue aware and determined university. In seeking to influence the employability orientation of the student body, an institution with an employability-added identity might attempt to communicate to the core audience of potential students the need to understand and act upon their personal responsibility to engage with the development of their employability in the spirit of



co-production. Interestingly, the web pages for prospective undergraduate students at the university in case 4 now carry the message “We aim to be the university of choice for career-minded students.” (This has echoes of the statements made by the employability-intrinsic university in case 1) In case 3, the university appeared to be conveying the co-production message clearly and consistently, both from a central, corporate perspective and via messages from the academic SBUs. At the time of the study, this university was also the strongest performer amongst the case studies in terms of graduate prospects scores. It also has the advantage of the long standing strategic capability developed at unit level in the professional service and then built upon and deployed by the broader community. Perhaps this is an example of a university successfully moving its employability identity organically from employability-added to “employability-embedded” in the sense of creating a culture of mutual understanding of and engagement with “how we do things around here” across the university community of students and staff in the professional service, the academic SBUs and the co-curricular skills providers. From different starting points and by various paths, the other employability-added universities in the study are seeking to achieve the same goal. The relative maturity of the organisation in case 3 and the evolutionary path in case 5 can usefully be contrasted with the urgency in case 4 to illustrate both the pre existence of employability as a factor in positional competition and the way in which this has been exacerbated and sharpened by recent government moves to more overt marketisation and consumerism.

#### **4.10: Status positioning:**

All the universities in the study have or are developing organisational stances and configurations in relation to employability which reflect their strategic goals in relation to positional/status competition in the sector. These tend to have a strong identity basis in terms of self image and public image, which might inform educated guesses on the part of potential students and their families regarding personal positional/status returns.

In case 1 the university presents as an *authentic* employability-intrinsic institution. It sets out to appeal to potential students who will make educated guesses about positional returns based on this identity and associated reputation and track record (not on the basis of general, perceived status). DLHE-based measures support this position.

In case 2, the university seeks to position itself as high quality, with good positional returns whilst being conspicuously accessible, within its peer group in relation to widening participation. In performance terms, it is (becoming) concerned with the interplay between the two sets of measures (graduate destinations and widening participation). In relation to educated guesses, the desired position is a niche one in terms of the relative entry credentials “price” of access to the positional status returns associated with a high quality university. The configuration of employability resources is beginning to reflect this duality.

In case 3 the university has developed an employability eco-system and track record which would support general educated guesses about this as a high status university generating strong positional returns in an atmosphere of co-production. The DLHE-based measures support this position and the niche element of regional/civic contribution in graduate employment terms.

In case 4 the university seeks to avoid any danger of the “moment of truth” exposure of the relatively (to very high status) historically weak employability performance undermining “top ten” status. The intention is to ensure that the public measures of employability success reinforce, rather than detract from the educated guesses about high levels of positional status return and to achieve this as soon as possible. The configuration of employability resources clearly reflects the intention and the urgency.

In case 5 the university is seeking to move ahead of the pack of its close peers and to position itself in the “best of the rest” group (my terminology) just behind the “golden triangle” universities (effectively joining the university in case 4). It seeks an employability offer and outcomes which will reinforce the desired status. This university is building on a track record of development in terms of the configuration of its employability resources, so that employability and more general status evolve together rather than pursuing an urgent need for employability to catch up with general status as in case 4.

In cases 4 and 5, where the perceived relationship between employability and positional competition in absolute status (as distinct from niche/identity) terms is at its strongest, we see the most significant degree and pace of change in the configuration of employability resources and capability. We also see the emergence of a new category of employability leader, not seen before in the context of the higher education careers profession. In both cases, the HoCs role has moved

beyond leadership of the central service alone, to leadership of the institutional employability effort in its broadest sense. In both cases, the HoCS is an active participant and driver of the new approach, not a hapless victim of institutional strategy. Equally, these new roles provide their institutions with a highly visible and directly accountable, individual manager with responsibility for ensuring success in an area linked directly to positional competition.

In cases 4 and 5 employability is important and an issue and the universities are looking to the “new role” HoCS to deliver the solutions. The evidence suggests that should employability become an issue at the university in case 3, the university would look to the HoCS to lead the formulation and delivery of solutions. A niche, identity-based approach to employability is emerging in case 2 and the university is looking to the HoCS to lead on this. Again, this is generating a new service (but not service and academic SBU) leadership role (combining employability and widening participation) not previously seen within the profession. If employability became an issue at the university in case 1 it seems that the university would look to the HoCS to be instrumental in highlighting the level and location of performance issues but would look to the academic SBUs to drive solutions.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and next steps.**

This study is a piece of practitioner research undertaken in the hope of generating some insights which may have some practical value to other practitioners and fellow managers within universities and to external evaluators, researchers and stakeholders with an interest in understanding and/or shaping organisational responses to employability in higher education. In this sense it is a starting point and no more. The insights and emergent explanatory categories gained from the case studies might help institutions and other stakeholders to ask some useful questions in planning and evaluating organisational responses to the employability agenda, but it is important to stress that these questions and categories have limited explanatory or predictive value in and of themselves. Rather any value lies in their use as starting points for developing in-depth case studies with a view to generating a full narrative. If for example, university X appears to be organising itself in relation to employability in a way which does not have face value resonance with its perceived employability identity, this does not in itself explain what is going on, but it might make it an interesting case study to develop from an external perspective, or be the starting point for an internal evaluation.

This study does suggest that any evaluation of organisational responses to employability in higher education should start from the premise that positional competition will be an underlying factor and that the development of the response is likely to depend on the interaction between this factor and combinations of the other variables identified. It is also suggested that the positioning of the institution's careers service on the non-extended to integrated continuum may be a valuable initial clue and a "window" into the configuration of employability resources and capability.

This chapter will focus on some ideas for higher education managers with an interest in the organisational response to the employability agenda. This audience could include managers at the corporate, executive level, managers in academic SBUs and those with specific responsibility for employability-related activities, especially HoCS. The approach will be to use the main themes which emerged from the study as suggested starting points for the development of internal case studies, which may provide a narrative upon which to base understanding of the current situation and choices around future direction. The starting points are set out below in

no particular order, as these issues may well be explored concurrently rather than sequentially

### **5.1: Issue Awareness.**

For an individual institution, one basic starting point might be issue awareness. Is employability perceived at the strategic leadership level as important and/or an issue? Whilst the focus here is on whole-institution approaches, it should be acknowledged that there could be variations in issue awareness within the institution, across academic SBUs and between SBUs and the corporate centre. For example employability may be judged to be important but not an issue for the institution as a whole, but may be seen as important and an issue by the Dean of a particular SBU.

The notion of issue awareness is critical to understanding and shaping organisational responses. It is especially important for those managers whose job roles are likely (and rightly, in context) to see employability as both important and an issue (HoCS for example), to understand the extent to which this is perceived to be the case at the level of the institutional leadership. One answer to the question “Is employability important in our university?” might be that it is of course, important because it constitutes one of a relatively small number of performance measures which will feature in the league tables and the KIS. This is clearly the case in absolute terms, but a more useful question might be “what is the importance of employability, relative to other aspects of performance?”

Case 4 for example, clearly identified employability as a key performance measure within a set which were seen to be determinants of “top ten” performance. Employability was seen as important as a measure to which attention needs to be paid and as an issue because performance was seen as sub-optimal. However, there is close peer university with an almost identical ranking within the top twelve in the “Complete University Guide 2013” overall league table whose ranking on graduate prospects alone would drop the ranking to thirty-seven and another within the top twenty of the overall table with a graduate prospects score outside the top fifty. In case 4, employability was seen as sufficiently important to be among the most important items for the institution to consider. From the outside, it is impossible to know whether or not this is the case at the other institutions mentioned here, but for interested parties within those universities it would be a useful question to ask,

as this would determine whether or not the apparently sub-optimal performance is or will become, an issue.

Given an understanding of the importance of employability, do the key indicators suggest that there is something amiss? The key indicators would seem likely to be the public domain, DLHE based measures and related league tables (plus the High Fliers employer rankings for the minority involved). Although the case study evidence suggested that there is intelligent debate and awareness of the shortcomings of the measures, there was no evidence to suggest that there has yet been any development of corporate level metrics associated with employability as market-independent capability, as distinct from the existing employment outcome measures, although it is clear that there will be monitoring of inputs in the SLA models referred to in this study.

Devising internal measures designed to understand the development of employability as capability may be useful, because there may be some important differences between the development of students' capability at the point of graduation and the official measurement of their employment outcomes six months later. In some cases, these will be as a result of choices, (often lifestyle rather than career) exercise by the graduates within the timeframe of the DLHE exercise. For example, a major Russell Group university which attracts many students who make lifestyle choices to remain in the city after graduation is frequently at or close to the top of the High Fliers Top Twenty league table of most targeted campuses, which suggests that major recruiters see this university as a significant and reliable source of employable graduates, is also frequently at or close to the bottom of the Russell Group table on graduate prospects scores. In terms of generating information which might be useful in determining whether or not there is an employability issue to be tackled, an internal means of assessing progress on capability might answer a question along the lines of "are we doing what we set out to do?" Another potential source of information on whether or not something is amiss seems to be the inclusion of a specific question on employability support to be included in the National Student Survey (NSS) which has been recommended in the Review of University-Business Collaboration (Wilson 2012).

The idea that some institutions (such as 1 and 3) are in successful equilibrium with low issue awareness does not mean that they will not regularly monitor the situation to ensure that performance remains on track, or pursue the incremental

development of strategic capability as is the case at the universities in cases 1 and 2 . However, the study suggests that high issue awareness prompts and accelerates change and that in those two institutions, differences in employability identity and the nature of the internal employability eco-system mean that the position of the careers service in leading the solution to a perceived employability issue would be quite different.

These factors may be of particular importance to individual careers services and to AGCAS if and where there are potentially naïve assumptions about the importance of employability automatically enhancing the profile and resource position of careers services. This may be the case, but it may not, if for example, employability is important but not an issue and/or the careers service would not be seen as central to the solution if employability was an issue.

## **5.2: Employability Identity**

In understanding, evaluating and planning organisational responses, it may be sensible for the institution to be clear about its actual and intended employability identity. Is the identity employability-intrinsic, employability-added or a mixed economy? Does the institution want to sustain the current employability identity or attempt to change it in some way (bearing in mind the scale of the task involved in the latter)?

For some universities an important and potentially challenging question might be along the lines of how real is our employability identity? Or is our employability identity what we think it is? These sorts of questions might be addressed purely internally or might benefit from the view of an external consultant or “critical friend.” These questions are prompted largely through considering the position of the university in case 1, with its strong claim to authenticity and continuity, relative to that of other institutions with ostensibly very similar roots and perceived employability identities. The evidence in case 1 suggested that the university has a clearly employability intrinsic past, present and future. The university’s organisation for employability fits this identity. It was suggested in the study that an employability intrinsic origin is no guarantee of employability success today, pointing to the relatively poor performance on graduate prospects scores of some universities which share university A’s polytechnic origins. Given the scale of change over the last twenty years in particular (since the abolition of the binary divide between universities and polytechnics) it might be useful to consider the possibility that a

perceived employability-intrinsic identity is not necessarily a guarantee of the same identity after twenty years of change.

It may also be interesting to look at cases in which at face value, there appears to be a high level of issue awareness driving change but where the change does not appear to fit with the perceived employability identity. A brief example is given here, but it should be stressed that this is an example based on a view from outside, which is clearly not as well informed as the in-depth case studies.

Approximately five years ago employability issue awareness was very high at a former polytechnic. Employability was seen as important as a potential market differentiator and as an issue, because performance was not good. Executive determination was high and radical action was taken. The existing guidance-based careers service was seen as unfit for purpose and “part of the problem” and disbanded. The university established a new centre bringing in a new leader at a much more senior level than the previous HoCS. The remit of the new centre was to be the central driver of the addition of employability skills to all programmes. On the face of it, this appears to be an employability-added organisational response in what might be assumed to be an employability-intrinsic institution (a former polytechnic, as in case 1).

This could be an example of going against the grain of employability identity, but might also raise useful questions in relation to assumptions about institutions. Even though most commentators would unhesitatingly bracket them together, how alike are this institution and the university in case 1? Were polytechnics always the same? Even if they were, have they remained alike in the years since the abolition of the binary divide? If we assume that as a polytechnic, this institution was very like the university in case 1 in 1992, might it be that the institution has drifted or been deliberately steered away from employability-intrinsic towards employability-added in the intervening period in ways which do not apply in case 1? If this was the case and the new identity was acknowledged, then the employability-added style of response might have been seen as appropriate. It could be the case that a move away from an employability-intrinsic identity (which may continue to be assumed by many stakeholders) had been the unintended consequence of the pursuit of other agendas but became apparent when employability became an issue.



The point here is not to present one form of identity as better than another but to suggest that in some cases, change of identity may have occurred incrementally and until examined, imperceptibly. The suggestion is that an honest evaluation of current and intended employability identity would be a very useful exercise for any institution intending to evaluate and/or develop its organisational response. For example, if there had been a change over time from employability-intrinsic to employability-added, but employability-intrinsic identity was seen as the “true” identity then that might point to some fundamental failing in the delivery of employability through the core educational experience. Would the institution tackle that potentially mammoth task in order to maintain/return to an employability-intrinsic identity, or embrace employability-added identity as the new reality?

It may be that employability identity is not consistent across the institution and this may be particularly true in cases of mergers over a period of time or diversification of institutions such as former teacher training colleges which were originally virtual monotecnics with highly employability-intrinsic identities. In such cases the organisational response may require complex negotiation between the corporate centre, the academic SBUs and the professional careers service.

### **5.3: Co-Production with Students**

It might be helpful for institutions to keep in mind the notion of co-production, the student input into this and the ways in which the student intake influences identity. In addition to the presumed motivation of students who choose overtly employability-intrinsic institutions and courses, there are examples amongst employability added institutions where the student motivation input to co-production is very strong. The “bring a friend” example quoted earlier is one example. Another is the fact that in the absence of any intrusion of employability (at least with that label) into their world-class academic programmes, 87% of final year undergraduates and more than 30% of first year undergraduates at Cambridge, voluntarily register with the university’s careers service (Chesterman 2011). So, institutions might usefully ask themselves about the employability motivation of students choosing and/or chosen by the institution in question. In doing this, it would be important to try to distinguish between employability motivation as the extent to which students are prepared to be active partners in co-production and an assumption of an atmosphere of heightened consumerism (which may or may not transpire in reality) in which students demand that employability be delivered to them in return for higher fees. Assuming that

institutions would hope to influence the student input to co-production in ways which may enhance institutional success, it might be the case that those institutions with an employability-added identity would need to consider the extent to which their organisational responses include education on expectations for incoming students. The coherent “employability embedded” messages in case 3 are interesting in this regard.

The earlier reference to Cambridge and the level of student motivation also brings us back to the notion of employability identity in the context of positional competition and co production. In common with a very small group of other elite institutions, Cambridge occupies territory at the top of league tables in which all indicators, including employability are high. Even in an era of deliberately engineered focus on consumer information, the pure status –based educated guesses and the data-based “moments of truth” tend to be mutually reinforcing. Given the evident distribution of the most academically able and motivated students and the magnetic attraction of the elite institutions to even the most selective “top employers” the circle of co-production is extremely strong and effective. Whilst it is undoubtedly the case that some unengaged and/or academically unsuccessful students may not gain the full benefit it may be that at a few employability-added institutions at this end of the market in both the pre-existing and newly sharpened positional competition that might be ascribed an “employability implied” identity.

#### **5.4: Professional Service/Corporate Centre/Academic SBU alignment and Strategic Capability**

In the context of their employability identity, institutions might consider the bases of the organisational response in relation to the strategic capability. They might consider not simply the existence and scale of resources devoted to or contributing to employability, but the ways in which these can be configured to generate advantage. The professional careers service may or may not be at the core of this approach. In case 1 strategic capability has its roots in the core educational experience and therefore, the academic SBUs, (with an important, but not a leadership role for the central careers service). Of course this is a generalisation and there may be exceptions. For example, the industrial placement units were taken out of the academic SBUs and combined with the careers service and student employment (part time/casual “job shop”) into a central Placement and Careers Centre (PCC) at Brunel University. Brunel is a pre '92 former CAT with an

essentially employability-intrinsic identity, but it might be reasonable to assume that this configuration means the central service would feature strongly in any consideration of strategic capability at that university. The fact that the PCC at Brunel has been named as “best placement/careers centre” for the second time in the last three years at the national placement and internship awards (Brunel University 2012) might suggest that the service would not be perceived as the weak link. If the work in this study were to be extended, Brunel may make a particularly interesting case study. Seen through the organisational response lens of this study, Brunel might be a mirror image of the hub and spoke model in case 5.

The examples in this study suggest that the professional careers service can be central to the organisational response in employability-added universities. In these institutions, it would make sense to appraise the position of the professional service as a starting point. In case 5 there was issue awareness around employability. This was related to building on a positive trajectory to achieve very high level success commensurate with overall corporate aspirations. There was a well established professional service with a well regarded leader, associated with the recent positive trajectory. The service leader was well placed to advise on/ lead the organisational response which was built around the service. In other cases, it may be that the fitness for purpose of the existing service may be called into question and/or the nature, scale and pace of change required might be seen as beyond the reach of the central service and its leadership as currently configured, necessitating change. As the different approaches in the case studies have shown, institutions building an approach around the professional service may need to make informed choices, perhaps determined by the perceived urgency of the situation, about the nature of the management relationships between staff in the professional service and the academic SBUs, the extent to which engagement with the offer needs to be made structurally unavoidable and the extent of curricular intervention.

### **5.5: Questions for the Higher Education Careers Profession**

Important questions emerge for the HoCS’ profession in the form of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). For many years, the association has needed to accommodate the needs of a diversity of HoCS, but this has been determined mainly by the scale of the service through which the traditional core services have been delivered and the attendant seniority of the post-holders within their institutions. In recent years, this diversity has increased as some HoCS’ roles

have changed and developed due to their being leaders of the “extended careers services” described by Watts and Butcher. This study suggests that the profession is seeing the emergence of further diversity as a sub set of its HoCS members occupy roles which are radically different because they are not limited to, or even primarily about, being the heads of central careers services but who are necessarily the leaders/coordinators of institution-wide collaborative employability network organisations of varying degrees of complexity and formality. Understanding these emerging roles and organisations will be important for AGCAS.

The study also suggests that there are some important assumptions for the association to consider and challenge. Is there an automatic positive relationship between the importance of employability and the standing and resourcing of AGCAS member services? The study would suggest not. This may be because employability is important but not an issue in a given institution. Where employability is an issue, it does not necessarily follow that the careers service is core to the organisational solution and this may be less likely in employability-intrinsic institutions. This is not necessarily negative, as a service may play a well regarded professional role, which fits with institutional identity, even if it is not core to the delivery of the strategy via the academic SBUs (as in case 1). If there are cases where the careers service is perceived as “part of the problem” this could have a more detrimental impact on the future of the service where it is non-core and therefore less likely to be improved and developed as part of the solution.

The case study examples suggest that the perceived calibre of the service leader is key to determining the role of the service in shaping the organisational response in some cases and that this relates to the ability to develop strategic capability either incrementally at unit level, which is then more widely deployed (as in case 3) or rapidly at both unit and institutional level simultaneously (as in case 4) or sequentially (as in case 5).

## **5.6: Issues for Employers**

Employers are important stakeholders and those regular graduate recruiters who interact frequently with universities are especially relevant here. University careers services constitute the most important channel to potential candidates. 93% of the Times Top 100 employers rank careers services as their number one channel. 41% intend to increase their careers service interaction in 2012, with 58% maintaining

interaction and only 1% planning a decrease (High Fliers 2012). The configuration of institutions' employability organisations and the place of the careers service within it are of significant interest to the major graduate recruiter constituency. The indication that careers services seem to be forming the core of more "joined up" approaches (thereby enabling better access to candidates within academic SBUs as well as through the central service) in employability-added institutions seems likely to appeal to this constituency. Eighteen of the top twenty campuses most frequently targeted by the Times Top 100 are employability-added institutions (High Fliers 2012). The university in case 3 has been established in the top twenty table for some time, but it is interesting to note the progress of the universities in case 2 (new entrant in 2011), case 4 (new entrant in 2012) and case 5 (previously in the top twenty, but entered the top ten for the first time in 2012).

### **5.7: Policy issues**

Some of the issues raised here might be helpful to policy makers and commentators in understanding that one size cannot fit all in responding to the employability agenda. An employability-added university cannot easily convert its offer to employability-intrinsic and may risk alienating its traditional audience of potential students if it did. Employability initiatives designed to add employability to the core educational experience may have little currency with staff or students in a genuinely employability-intrinsic university. Exhortations towards consumerism have the potential to undermine essential student understanding of their input to the co-production of employability, especially in employability-added institutions. Employability identity may not necessarily follow the easy categorisation, by so-called "mission group" or pre/post '92, often employed by commentators and policy makers.

### **5.8: The New Fees Era and positional Competition**

This study took place just as higher fees were about to be introduced in 2012. It may be very interesting to re visit this research at a point at which the impact of the new fees on student behaviour can be seen in action rather than assumed to some degree as is necessarily the case at the moment.

The case studies have all proven to be examples of successful organisational approaches to employability, which fit with the institutional ethos and one or other of the two types employability identity identified in this study.

It is clear in all case, however, that the direction of travel was established before (in some cases, well before) the government drive towards consumerism manifested itself in the KIS, but that the evolution of organisational approaches is being affected by the new environment. The institutions were considering the ways in which their employability offers were conceptualised, constructed, managed and measured in response to pre-existing positional/status competition of the kind suggested by Marginson, but as that competition is sharpened, the institutions are pursuing strategies which appear to be differently related to pure, perceived status as envisaged in relation to Marginson's suggestion of educated guesses by potential students, their families and advisers about personal, positional returns. They seem to include some which seek to be related to pure status and to reinforce educated guesses in that regard and others seeking to communicate identity-based differentiation, encouraging potential students to make their educated guesses on a different basis.

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